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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Mimetic Desire in *Sister Carrie*, *The House of Mirth*, and *The Portrait of a Lady*

by

Lahoucine Ouzgane

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled Mimetic Desire in *Sister Carrie*, *The House of Mirth*, and *The Portrait of a Lady* submitted by Lahoucine Ouzgane in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

The thesis examines some major American novels in the light of Rene Girard's theory of desire, first elaborated in his Deceit, Desire, and the Novel. Girard's insight is that all desire is mediated, never the simple movement of a subject toward a desired object. The subject seeks to appropriate for himself the apparently greater autonomy of another, by desiring what this other desires.

In the "Introduction," I outline Girard's thesis and briefly consider Twain's Huckleberry Finn, Cooper's The Pioneers, Crane's Maggie, and Howells's The Rise of Silas Lapham to point out the scope and show the applicability of Girard's ideas.

In the remaining three chapters, I examine in detail the processes of mediated desire in Sister Carrie's 'kingdom of greatness,' in The House of Mirth's society of negatives, and in Isabel Archer's quest for the 'aristocratic situation' in The Portrait of a Lady.

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Table of Contents

Chapter Page

Abstract iv

Acknowledgements v

I. Introduction 1

II. Sister Carrie's Kingdom of Greatness 49

III. The Society of Negatives in The House of Mirth 90

IV. Isabel Archer's Search for the Aristocratic Situation 138

Conclusion 194

Selected Bibliography 197

I. Introduction

Rene Girard's influential book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*[1] opens with the following passage from *Don Quixote*, in which the main character is addressing Sancho Panza, his companion:

> 'I want you to know, Sancho, that the famous Amadis of Gaul was one of the most perfect knight errants. But what am I saying, one of the most perfect? I should say the only, the first, the unique, the master and lord of all those who existed in the world.... I think...that, when a painter wants to become famous for his art he tries to imitate the originals of the best masters he knows; the same rule applies to most important jobs or exercises which contribute to the embellishment of republics; thus the man who wishes to be known as careful and patient should and does imitate Ulysses, in whose perfection and works Homer paints for us a vivid portrait of carefulness and patience, just as Virgil shows us in the person of Aeneas the valor of a pious son and the wisdom of a valiant captain; and it is understood that they depict them not as they are but as they should be, to provide an example of virtue for centuries to come. In the same way Amadis was the pole, the star, the sun for brave and amorous knights, and we others who fight under the banner of love and chivalry should imitate him. Thus, my friend Sancho, I reckon that whoever imitates him best will come closest to perfect chivalry.' (Part I, chapter 25)

The central idea of Girard's work is the concept of 'mimetic' or 'triangular' desire. According to Girard, "The standard view [of imitation], derived from Plato's *mimesis* via Aristotle's *Poetics*, has always excluded one essential human behavior from the types subject to imitation--namely, desire and, more fundamentally still, appropriation."[2] Girard maintains that a character desires an 'object,' not for itself, but for the value lent to it by the desire of another. Don Quixote, for example, believes that true chivalric existence can be lived only through a careful imitation of Amadis of Gaul, who seems to him to personify ideal knightly behaviour. Don Quixote's desire is thus, to use Girard's term, 'mediated,' rather than self-inspired: the disciple pursues objects that are determined for him by the 'mediator' of desire.

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[1] Rene Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965).

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[2] Rene Girard, *"To double business bound": Essays in Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) vii.

According to Bruce Bassoff, "This triangle of subject, object, and mediator is similar to Thorstein Veblen's model of 'conspicuous consumption,' where 'keeping up with the Joneses' means desiring what they possess regardless of the real value of the object."[3] But Bassoff then goes on to point out the difference between the two concepts: "Because the real goal of this desire is the strength and autonomy of the mediator rather than the concrete qualities of the object, this desire can also be called metaphysical."[4] In other words, in Girard's view, it is not a question of desiring what the Joneses possess but of desiring what they themselves appear to be. This is why Girard calls the desire "metaphysical," because it is aimed at the mediator's being. Veblen describes the phenomenon in only one of its manifestations: in economic behaviour. The two desires are essentially the same, obeying the same laws, but, through an extensive analysis of major European literary texts, Girard unravels the complicated strategies of mimetic desire, explores the depths and ways in which it can operate, and provides numerous examples of its increasingly devastating effects on human relations. He points out, for instance, that mediated desire may affect one's entire life: virtually all of Don Quixote's adventures are determined by his imitation of Amadis of Gaul, just as Huck Finn's journey down the Mississippi, one could argue, is largely controlled by Tom Sawyer's spirit. Mediation of desire, in the form of a chance encounter, for example, can also jolt one out of a peaceful and contented existence into a tumultuous new way of life, as practically all the novels on the theme of the "Young Man from the Provinces" illustrate.

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[3] Bruce Bassoff, The Secret Sharers: Studies in Contemporary Fictions (New York: AMS Press, 1983) 126.

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[4] Bassoff 126.

Girard argues that certain great novels are structured throughout by the dynamics of triangular desire. And, in addition to Don Quixote, Girard's book deals with several works by Flaubert, Stendhal, Proust, and Dostoyevsky.

The mediation of which Don Quixote and Emma Bovary--who desires mostly through the romantic heroines that fill her imagination (see chapter six of Madame Bovary)--are assenting victims is predominantly 'external,' the mediator being remote and ideal. In this kind of mediation, the subject and his mediator are in perfect harmony because there is no contact whatsoever between their two different spheres. The distance separating them is, however, not merely geographical: it is spiritual, for the model and his disciple never desire the same objects, and rivalry between the two remains, therefore, out of the question.

While we still find this form of mediation in Julien Sorel's imitation of Napoleon, it is really 'internal mediation' that pervades the social world of Stendhal's The Red and the Black. Whereas the hero in 'external mediation' can openly proclaim his desires, in 'internal mediation,' the subject carefully hides his, for now the mediator is on the same level as the subject: he has come down to earth and may very well appropriate the object of desire. At this point, the mediator, also called the Other, is transformed from a model who is imitated into a rival who is combatted. The process becomes very complex because rivalry aggravates mediation, and mediation breeds more mediation: often without realizing it, the subject and the model end up imitating one another. As 'internal mediation' intensifies, the initial importance of the desired object diminishes, the hero's sense of reality is lost, and his judgment paralyzed. In his survey of the history of desire through a study of the European novel, Girard identifies different stages of desire and observes that, in contrast to Don Quixote's elementary state of desire, Dostoyevsky's underground man represents the most advanced or the final stage in the evolution toward abstract desire. But the 'simple' and the 'complex' states can also be found in the same work.

Girard's perception is Hegelian in origin, for the starting point of his argument can be traced to Hegel's analysis of the birth of self-consciousness. For Hegel, "all human, anthropogenic Desire--the Desire that generates Self-Consciousness, the human reality--is, finally, a function of the desire for 'recognition.'"[5] Girard takes this notion further when he observes that what individuals desire is not only recognition but perfection, being, metaphysical autonomy, divinity.

Another way of looking at Girard's concept of 'triangular desire' is to see it as an attempt to determine whether free will or imitation is the source of desire or action in a character. In this respect, the directions taken and the influences exerted by vanity, snobbery, hatred, envy, jealousy, resentment, emulation, and rivalry form the centre of Girard's critical interest.

Girard argues that, as the novel[6] approaches its conclusion, there is a convergence of hero and novelist, until often, at or near the end, both speak with almost the same voice. For Girard, the great novelist is thus the artist who, by laying bare his own and his character's illusions, repudiates his earlier romantic attitudes.

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[5] Alexandre Kojeve, Introduction to the Reading of Hegel (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1969) 7.

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[6] Girard describes the novels that actively reveal the presence of the mediator as "novelistic" and those that merely reflect that presence as "romantic."

Deceit, Desire, and the Novel is a rich and provocative study of the European novel. Its arguments have serious implications for aesthetic theory; for example, Girard's focus on the dynamics of human relationships gives flexibility to the concepts of genre and period. As his subsequent works demonstrate, the notion of mediated desire is applicable to other literary genres and is not restricted to the novel; as well, Girard's Violence and the Sacred traces the phenomenon of mimetic desire from the beginnings of human civilization down to the strategies of modern advertizing, designed to convince us that an object is desirable, not for itself, but because other people (especially those we admire) also desire it. Rene Girard's idea that "internal mediation triumphs in a universe where the differences between men are gradually erased"[7] seems also relevant to modern times and makes the American novel a particularly appropriate field for testing his thesis.

In the next pages of this "Introduction," therefore, I propose a brief examination of four major American works in the light of Girard's concept of mimetic desire. I have chosen to begin with Twain's Huckleberry Finn because of its central position in American fiction; Richard Poirier actually calls the novel "a kind of history of American literature."[8] I then look at Cooper's The Pioneers as an example of the early American novel. Crane's Maggie, the work I consider next, is usually regarded as the first naturalistic American novel of any real significance; moreover, the setting of Maggie is a great contrast to that of The Pioneers. Finally, I examine Howells's The Rise of Silas Lapham as an example of American realism. Notwithstanding their differences in period or genre, these four novels have in common mimetic desire as their central subject.

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[7] Girard 14.

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[8] Richard Poirier, A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature (New York: Oxford UP, 1966) 16.

The main body of the thesis will provide a detailed examination of the workings of mimetic desire in Dreiser's Sister Carrie, Wharton's The House of Mirth, and James's The Portrait of a Lady. In spite of some obvious differences, particularly between James's and Dreiser's works--differences that form the basis for Lionel Trilling's essay "Reality in America"--the three novels invite special scrutiny because they deal with individuals in a developed society (as opposed to individuals against a background of nature): society in the widest and crudest sense in Dreiser, more limited and refined in Wharton, and European society in James. Though Sister Carrie comes after The Portrait, Dreiser presents desire in a simpler form--so, for all her greater sophistication, does Wharton. Of course, in a way, this is only to restate the obvious in a different way--for the usual view is that Dreiser is the simplest, Wharton more complex, and James the most complex. The transition from Dreiser to Wharton to James might be defined as the advance of metaphysical at the expense of physical desire. In Sister Carrie, the characters' desires are mostly for crude objects, and Dreiser himself does not seem fully convinced of the need to transcend material things. The House of Mirth portrays an intermediate form of desire in that the characters seek to enter or maintain their position in New York society. The Portrait of a Lady, with its more complex and fully realized protagonists, presents desire at its advanced stage as Isabel Archer attempts to transcend worldly attachments altogether in her progress toward abstract desire. In addition to this concern with desire, the three novels centre on the lives of three heroines who have other things in common: Carrie Meeber, Lily Bart, and Isabel Archer are uprooted characters in that they lack a real home, a real family, and a sustaining tradition. It is worth noting that Dreiser and Wharton set the opening scenes of their novels in railway stations as if to stress the sense of geographical and social mobility in the lives of their main protagonists. This uprootedness makes the characters inevitably susceptible to human mediation. As well, both Carrie and Lily, we are told, need the advice and help of either a counsellor or a friend. In this respect, Robert Ames, Lawrence Selden, and also Ralph Touchett can be said to represent, with varying degrees of success, the mentor figures for three heroines confronting the different manifestations of desire in *Sister Carrie*, *The House of Mirth*, and *The Portrait of a Lady*.

Most influential critics of American literature agree that Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a masterpiece. Lionel Trilling, for instance, describes Twain's novel as "one of the world's great books and one of the central documents of American culture"[9]; Peter Coveney, in his "Introduction" to the Penguin edition, claims that Huckleberry Finn is "certainly the most important novel of the American nineteenth century,"[10] and Richard Chase locates the greatness of Huckleberry Finn in "the simple clairvoyance of the truth it tells."[11]

Opinions differ, however, as to how one should understand Huck Finn's relationship with Tom Sawyer, especially in the episode which begins when Huck arrives at the Phelps' farm and Tom reappears. Chase does not believe that the relationship poses any problems at all; for him, the function of the novel is "to sweep silliness out of existence" since "Huck Finn," he argues, "frees himself of the romance imagination of Tom Sawyer...by saying in various contexts: I don't take no stock in it."[12] However, Leo Marx, in his famous essay "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and Huckleberry Finn," rejects the other two critics' unqualified praise of the novel and calls the ending a "great flaw."[13] Before him, Bernard De Voto, a well-known authority on Twain, had observed that "in the whole reach of the English novel there is no more abrupt or more chilling descent"[14] than the ending of Huckleberry Finn.

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[9] Lionel Trilling, "The Greatness of Huckleberry Finn," Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, eds. Sculley Bradley and others, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1961): 319.

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[10] Peter Coveney, introduction, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 9.

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[11] Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1957) 142.

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[12] Chase 145.

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[13] Leo Marx, "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and Huckleberry Finn," The American Scholar 22.4 (Autumn 1953): 424.

In his book A World Elsewhere, Poirier identifies an important phenomenon in Huck Finn's attitude toward Tom Sawyer--a phenomenon that can, if properly understood, throw some new light on Twain's novel as a whole. Writing on how the society depicted in Huck Finn shapes its members, Poirier notes that

> [Huck] consistently imitates [Tom], and to that extent is, like the rest of this society, imitating "books" and "authorities." He repeatedly cites Tom as his own authority for tricks and adventures that are conspicuously at odds with both his feelings and self-interest.[15]

The kind of relationship Poirier describes between Huck and Tom reminds us of the one between Don Quixote and Amadis of Gaul, his ideal embodiment of the chivalric code. A few examples from Twain's novel will suffice to show the great extent to which imitation determines Huck's desire for Tom's style. His admiration for Tom can be clearly discerned as early as chapter seven, in which Huck describes his bold and imaginative escape from the old log hut in which his father had imprisoned him:

> I did wish Tom Sawyer was there, I knowed he would take an interest in this kind of business, and throw in the fancy touches. Nobody could spread himself like Tom Sawyer in such a thing as that.[16]

Huck is not convinced that his escape can really be labelled a complete success because the model was not present to give his approval. Huck's words make it clear that there is nothing in the manner of the escape which can be said to be at odds with his feelings or his self-interest;

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[14] Bernard De Voto, Mark Twain At Work (Cambridge, 1942) 92.

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[15] Poirier 190.

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[16] Samuel Langhorne Clemens, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, ed. Sculley Bradley and others, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1961) 31. Subsequent references are from this edition.

in fact, Huck's trick serves to prove his inventiveness and his cleverness on the one hand and the gullibility of the society he is fleeing on the other. But, in spite of this shrewdness, Huck considers Tom a superior model because the latter has both daring and style.

Tom's influence on Huck proves so strong that one can legitimately argue that Jim and Huck's journey down the Mississippi remains largely controlled by Tom's spirit. Just as Tom seems obsessed with doing things the right way because literature has determined his view of experience, Huck is concerned with doing things in Tom's way. Huck is in fact constantly revealed as acting out of adherence to an externally imposed code. In chapter twelve, when Huck and Jim chance upon the _Sir Walter Scott_, Huck once more invokes his model to explain to a reluctant Jim why they have to board the steamboat:

> 'Do you reckon Tom Sawyer would ever go by this thing? Not for pie, he wouldn't. He'd call it an adventure--that's what he'd call it; and he'd land on that wreck if it was his last act. And wouldn't he throw style into it? wouldn't he spread himself, for nothing? Why, you'd think it was Christopher C'lumbus discovering Kingdom-Come. I wish Tom Sawyer _was_ here.' (57)

That Huck's admiration for Tom is unequivocal shows how Huck does 'take stock' in Tom's extravagant style. And when clearly understood, such a style reveals the character's desire for glory, the desire to be recognized as someone inordinately clever.

Contrary to what Leo Marx thinks, Huck does _not_ part company with Tom as early as the end of chapter three; nor does he reject Tom's romanticizing of experience after chapter fifteen, as Poirier claims when he observes that "It is only at this point [when Huck humbles himself to Jim], not at any earlier one, that Huck does separate himself from Tom."[17] Toward the end of chapter twenty-eight, when Huck has managed to trick Mary Jane, her relatives, and the King and the Duke, he again compares his achievement to Tom Sawyer's abilities:

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[17] Poirier 192.

> I felt very good; I judged I had done it pretty neat--I reckoned Tom Sawyer couldn't a done it no neater himself. Of course he would a throwed more style into it, but I can't do that very handy, not being brung up to it. (154)

Although Huck's present trick is a noble one--since he manages to cheat the two scoundrels of their prize--he still feels the need for an audience and for Tom's approval in particular: Tom's style remains desirable this late in the novel.

Huck Finn's dependence on Tom Sawyer and his reluctance to part company with Tom once and for all put into question the very nature of Huck's learning. Is *Huckleberry Finn* a novel of education in the manner of *Great Expectations*, for instance? In "Why *Huckleberry Finn* Is a Great World Novel," Lauriat Lane Jr. argues that Mark Twain's book "gains its place as a world novel by its treatment of one of the most important events of life, the passage from youth into maturity. The novel is a novel of education.... One of the central patterns of the novel is the progress of [Huck's] learning" (2). But Richard Chase finds that "There is no real change in Huckleberry Finn during the course of the book" because "Huck is already initiated."[18]

Huck's experiences down the Mississippi do bring out his latent qualities. His memorable resolution in chapter thirty-one to "*go* to hell" (169) springs from his passionate readiness to ignore what others will think of him; his decision not to betray Jim rests on nothing more than feeling--unmediated feeling. Such passionate moments are, however, so infrequent in the story that one cannot talk with confidence about Huck's maturity because his education is by no means complete by the end of the novel.

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[18] Chase 144.

Poirier's idea that "'imitation' [in Huckleberry Finn] is shown to result in the loss of 'self-command' and an enslavement to social forms of expression that distort genuine feelings"[19] is correct in showing the extent to which imitation has enslaved Huck to Tom's mediation; in other words, imitation has made Huck passive, and that in itself explains why he is remarkably quiet in the last section of the novel, in which Tom Sawyer resorts to his ridiculously elaborate and extravagant plans to free an already free Jim. This loss of vitality of reaction in Huck is a clear indication of Tom's influence.

Mimetic desire is also at the heart of two major episodes of the novel, episodes in which Huck is involved only as a witness. The Grangerford-Shepherdson feud in chapters seventeen and eighteen, very reminiscent of the Capulet-Montague feud in Romeo and Juliet, can best be defined in mimetic terms. In spite of their deadly rivalries and their interminable cycle of revenge, the two clans, as Huck's language reveals, have much more in common than one would at first imagine; after describing the Grangerfords at length, Huck goes on to introduce their rivals:

> There was another clan of aristocracy around there--five or six families--mostly of the name of Shepherdson. They was as high-toned, and well born, and rich and grand, as the tribe of Grangerfords. The Shepherdsons and Grangerfords used the same steamboat landing... (88)

The emphasis on the similarities between the two families highlights the imitative character of their relationships: the two clans are embarked upon an endless process of copying one another's behaviour. This reciprocal emulation can again be observed in the narrator's description of the church service he attends with the Grangerfords: "Next Sunday we all went to church.... The men took their guns along, so did Buck, and kept them between their knees or stood them handy against the wall. The Shepherdsons done the same" (90). The resemblance between the two clans has grown so strong that each has become the mirror image of the other. To perceive the mimetic rivalry between the two houses is to realize the futility of the knightly code of honour controlling their lives (and deaths), and to understand why the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons are trapped in an increasingly violent reciprocity.

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[19] Poirier 191.

The other major episode that brilliantly illustrates the novel's concern with mediated desire is the scene in which, in obedience to the dictates of a 'gentleman's' code, Colonel Sherburn shoots old Boggs. Henry Nash Smith, while condemning Sherburn's cold-blooded murder of a helpless drunkard, believes that Mark Twain shares his character's attitude toward human beings. Smith notes that Sherburn anticipates such "transcendent figures" of Twain's later work as Hank Morgan in _A Connecticut Yankee_; Pudd'nhead Wilson; and Satan in _A Mysterious Stranger_. These figures, Smith argues, "are isolated by their intellectual superiority to the community; they are contemptuous of mankind in general; and they have more than ordinary power."[20] It is true that in chapter twenty-two Colonel Sherburn appears in an oddly favourable light when, alone but sure of himself, he scornfully braves, defies, and cows the crowd that had set out to lynch him. Sherburn's extraordinary power, it seems to me, derives from his uncanny knowledge of the dynamics of mediated desire. And it is precisely this knowledge that enables him to triumph over the excited mob. The confrontation begins with a brief 'struggle of consciousnesses,' which Sherburn easily wins; as Huck reports,

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[20] Henry Nash Smith, _Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer_ (1962) 113-17.

> Sherburn never said a word--just stood there, looking down. The stillness was awful creepy and uncomfortable. Sherburn run his eye slow along the crowd; and wherever it struck, the people tried a little to outgaze him, but they couldn't; they dropped their eyes and looked sneaky. Then pretty soon Sherburn sort of laughed; not the pleasant kind, but the kind that makes you feel like when you are eating bread that's got sand in it. (118)

Because the members have surrendered their separate identities to form the crowd, none of them dares take it on himself alone to break the silence or to outgaze Sherburn, whose look is deliberately focused on each one of them; his scornful and dismissive laugh, meant to cow the mob further, is a prelude to his no less contemptuous long speech:

> 'Do I know you? I know you clear through.... Your newspapers call you a brave people so much that you think you *are* braver than any other people....
>
> 'Your mistake is, that you didn't bring a man with you.... You brought *part* of a man--Buck Harkness, there--and if you hadn't had him to start you, you'd a taken it out in blowing.
>
> 'You didn't want to come.... But if only *half* a man--like Buck Harkness, there--shouts "Lynch him, lynch him!" you're afraid to back down--afraid you'll be found out to be what you are--*cowards*--and so you raise a yell and hang yourselves onto that half-a-man's coat tail.... The pitifulest thing out is a mob; that's what an army is--a mob; they don't fight with courage that's born in them, but with courage that's borrowed from their mass, and from their officers.' (118-19)

In a sense, the subject of Sherburn's speech is the degradation of human character that results from a loss of independent thought and action; in essence, Sherburn is exposing the mimetic process that leads to the formation and strength of a crowd. By posing questions and offering the answers, he is able to explain to the mob members how their presumed bravery is not self-inspired, but merely suggested to them by their newspapers, or copied from other members of the crowd. In spite of his arrogance and his lack of remorse, Sherburn possesses an accurate sense of what constitutes self; his idea that the crowd is simply swept by the contagious nature of desire finds corroboration in Huck's description of how the notion to lynch Sherburn had first started:

> Well, by-and-by somebody said Sherburn ought to be lynched. In about a minute everybody was saying it; so away they went, mad and yelling, and snatching down every clothes-line they come to, to do the hanging with. (117)

In the larger context of the novel, the Bricksville episode brilliantly demonstrates the total disintegration of personality when the latter is caught in the stream of mediated desire. By the end of the novel, therefore, we come to realize that mediation of desire constitutes one of the most fundamental concepts dramatized in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

Twain had already explored this phenomenon in some of his earlier writings; for instance, in "The Boys' Ambition" (1875), the young narrator's description of his aspirations is very revealing:

> I first wanted to be a cabin-boy, so that I could come out with a white apron on and shake a table-cloth over the side, where all my old comrades could see me; later I thought I would rather be the deck-hand who stood on the end of the stage-plank... because he was particularly conspicuous. (66)[21]

No matter how often the desire changes, its ultimate object remains the same: like Pip in Great Expectations, the narrator wants to be different, to be uncommon. He does not, however, get the chance to leave his small town; but one of his friends does, and for a long time:

> At last he turned up as apprentice engineer or "striker" on the steamboat. This thing shook the bottom out of all my Sunday-school teachings. That boy had been notoriously worldly, and I just the reverse; yet he was exalted to this eminence, and I left in obscurity and misery. There was nothing generous about this fellow in his greatness. He would always manage to have a rusty bolt to scrub while his boat tarried at our town, and he would sit on the inside guard and scrub it, where we all could see him and loathe him. And whenever his boat was laid up he would come home and swell around the town... and he used all

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[21] Selected Shorter Writings of Mark Twain, ed. Walter Blair (Boston: Houghton, 1962).

> sorts of steamboat technicalities in his talk, as if he were so used to them that he forgot common people could not understand them. He would speak of the "labboard" side of a horse in an easy, natural way that would make one wish he was dead.... Two or three of the boys had long been persons of consideration among us because they had been to St. Louis once and had a vague general knowledge of its wonders, but the day of their glory was over now. They lapsed into a humble silence, and learned to disappear when the ruthless "cub"-engineer approached.... If ever a youth was cordially admired and hated by his comrades, this one was.
>
> This creature's career could produce but one result, and it speedily followed. Boy after boy managed to get on the river. (66-67)

The narrator's reaction to his friend's conspicuousness is a combination of criticism, hatred, envy, and admiration. He is perspicacious enough to see through the striker's poses and his calculated moves to impress his former friends with his superior standing; the narrator realizes that the apprentice engineer's eminence and glory are spurious because they are the result of studied effects. However, the general consideration that comes with such a glory, and the natural and easy manner that results from it prove too enticing for the young narrator and for the other boys in town to be easily relinquished. The striker has thus become everybody's model: they all hope to be like him. What the narrator fails to see is that the model himself needs the admiring looks of everybody to maintain his eminence: his greatness is itself mediated through his comrades' envy and admiration. The narrator is yet unaware of the dynamics of double mediation. Twain's "The Boys' Ambition" clearly demonstrates the effect of mediation on the characters' lives, particularly the contagious nature of mimetic desire.

The kind of empty glory which the apprentice engineer enjoys in "The Boys' Ambition" will again be Twain's object of satire in an important episode in Pudd'nhead Wilson (1894); when the Italian twins, "the handsomest, the best dressed, the most distinguished-looking pair of young fellows the West had ever seen"[22] come to live with the Coopers, a local family, the whole town of Dawson's Landing is overwhelmed with joy and admiration:

> Rowena [Mrs. Cooper's daughter] was in the clouds, she walked on air; this was to be the greatest day, the most romantic episode in the colorless history of that dull country town, she was to be familiarly near the source of its glory and feel the full flood of it pour ~~over~~ her and about her, the other girls could only gaze and envy, not partake. (28)

The following day, as Rowena and her mother receive the townspeople, who have come to meet the "illustrious foreigners,"

> Eager inquiries concerning the Twins were pouring into their enchanted ears all the time; each was the constant centre of a group of breathless listeners; each recognized that she knew now for the first time the real meaning of that great word Glory, and perceived the stupendous value of it, and understood why men in all ages had been willing to throw away meaner happinesses, treasure, life itself, to get a taste of its sublime and supreme joy. Napoleon and all his kind stood accounted for--and justified. (29)

Twain's intent in these two passages is clearly to debunk the Coopers' cheap version of glory--cheap precisely because such a glory amounts to nothing more than being in the public eye. In their chance and lucky association with people of "distinction and style" (92), Rowena and her mother suddenly find themselves basking in social conspicuousness as they become the centre of attention of Dawson's Landing. For the Coopers, glory is entirely rooted in the degree of admiration and jealous envy elicited among their friends and neighbours. To deride this narrow and empty conception of glory, Twain reduces glory to a concrete thing that Rowena can feel as it overflows all around her; the Coopers are also said to have at last fully grasped the exact value of what has always motivated, and excused, ambitious men of history. This episode in

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[22] Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins, ed. Sidney E. Berger (New York: Norton, 1980) 27.

Pudd'nhead Wilson illustrates Twain's conviction that for Rowena and her mother, typical citizens of Dawson's Landing, glory is significant only when it is oriented toward an eager and a breathless audience. As the next section on Cooper demonstrates, it is precisely such a conception of glory, such a desire for social recognition, that motivates a group of pioneers in a totally different setting and at a much earlier time in American history.

In his Studies in Classic American Literature, D. H. Lawrence calls James Fenimore Cooper's novel The Pioneers "a beautiful, resplendent picture of life." He then goes on to add, "Fenimore puts in only the glamour. Perhaps my taste is childish, but these scenes in Pioneers seem to me marvellously beautiful.... Pictures! Some of the loveliest, most glamorous pictures in all literature."[23] What Lawrence perceives as the idyllic quality of the scenes seems to me to be at odds with the novel's ironic tone, and the main episodes of the story, if carefully considered, reveal anything but harmony between the Templeton settlers and nature, and among the settlers themselves.

The most forceful impression conveyed by The Pioneers is one of change. The passages of natural description and the drama of human relationships in the process of settlement work well to show that everything in the novel is caught up in a cycle of constant and rapid transformation. On entering Templeton for the first time after an absence of four years, Elizabeth Temple dwells "on a scene which was so rapidly altering under the hands of man, that it only resembled, in its outlines, the picture she had so often studied, with delight, in childhood."[24] The changes are so swift and fundamental that Elizabeth's nostalgic recollections of her past seem unreal. Going through the streets of Templeton, Elizabeth comes across more alterations in the aspect of her village:

> Not only new occupations, but names that were stangers to her ears, met her gaze at every step.... The very houses seemed changed. This had been altered by an addition; that had been

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[23] D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1923) 61.

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[24] James Fenimore Cooper, The Pioneers, text established by Lance Schachterle and Kenneth M. Andersen, Jr. (Albany: State U of New York P, 1980) 40. Subequent references are from this edition.

> painted; another had been erected on the site of an old acquaintance, which had been banished from the earth, almost as soon as it made its appearance on it. (113)

The nostalgic tone of the passage suggests the inevitable sense of loss involved in the stream of change that is affecting the whole village.

More important, however, are the changes taking place among the settlers. The members of the community are frequently engaged in vying with one another for social prestige, and are generally involved in numerous conflicts and interminable disputes, giving the novel an atmosphere rich in competition, emulation, boasting, jealousy, resentment, and personal rivalries--in short, an atmosphere congenial to mimetic behaviour.

Marmaduke Temple's residence, for example, represents the most fashionable dwelling in the village. Its architects, Richard Jones and Hiram Doolittle, the "rival geniuses" (43) of Templeton, we are told, "had not only erected a dwelling for Marmaduke, but they had given a fashion to the architecture of the whole county" (43). It is, therefore, not surprising that in a very short time, as Cooper explains,

> The castle, as Judge Temple's dwelling was termed in common parlance, came to be the model, in some one or other of its numerous excellencies, for every aspiring edifice within twenty miles of it. (43)

The real significance of such a residence lies not in the physical comfort it provides its inhabitants but in the feeling of admiration it produces in whoever happens to look at it. Richard Jones himself is fully aware of this fact:

> A chief merit in a dwelling was to present a front, on whichever side it might happen to be seen; for as it was exposed to all eyes in all weathers, there should be no weak flank, for envy or unneighbourly criticism to assail. (44)

Richard's words cast the human interaction in Templeton in terms of a struggle for social pre-eminence; he sees one's possessions as means of impressing one's neighbours. But of Richard Jones more anon.

In addition to the judge's mansion, other buildings in the village seem infused with the prevailing spirit of contention and, like their owners, engage in endless rivalries; in chapter thirteen, we learn of how, second only to the judge's mansion, the "Bold Dragoon," the village inn, has become by far the most conspicuous edifice in the place; and, as Cooper explains, "This conspicuousness, aided by the characters of the host and hostess, gave the tavern an advantage over all its future competitors, that no circumstances could conquer" (145). But another edifice soon begins to challenge the supremacy of the "Bold Dragoon":

> At the corner diagonally opposite [the inn], stood a new building, that was intended, by its occupants, to look down all opposition. It was...one of the three imitators of the Mansion-House.... The exterior was painted white, on the front, and on the end which was exposed to the street; but in the rear, and on the side which was intended to join the neighbouring house, it was coarsely smeared with Spanish brown. (145-46)

The buildings in Templeton become symbolic extensions of their owners; the prominence of the facade, which suggests the characters' compulsive tendency to boast, reflects the vanity and the belligerent attitudes of the settlers.

Even Judge Temple, the leading citizen in the whole community, is not free from this spirit of contention, as the opening scene of the dispute over the deer shot on the road to Templeton clearly indicates; to Natty Bumppo, who rightly argues that the judge could not have killed the animal, Judge Temple explains his real interest in the dispute:

> 'Nay, Natty, it is for the honour that I contend. A few dollars will pay for the venison; but what will requite me for the lost honour of a buck's tail in my cap? Think, Natty, how I should triumph over that quizzing dog, Dick Jones, who has failed seven times already this season, and has only brought in one wood-chuck and a few grey squirrels.' (22)

Metaphysical desire, the need to triumph over his cousin, is the judge's real object, not the mere killing of a deer; displaying the buck's tail, the judge hopes, would put an end to Richard Jones's nagging questions. This opening scene exemplifies the pattern of development of most of the episodes in The Pioneers and represents in miniature the progression of the novel as a whole.

Everywhere in the novel one encounters characters bickering, grumbling, and boasting, all for the sake of social glory. Faced with Dr. Todd's display of Latin, Lippet, the village lawyer, thinks to himself that "It was dangerous...to appear to be outdone in learning in a public barroom, and before so many of his clients; he therefore put the best face on the matter, and laughed knowingly" (151). The importance Richard Jones puts on the 'front' of a dwelling translates itself here into Lippet's 'best face.' But the lawyer has every reason to be careful, for the doctor enjoys being a showman; during a surgical operation in chapter six, we watch as

> [Dr. Todd] stretched his long body to its utmost elevation, placing his hand on the small of his back, as if for support, and looked about him, to discover what effect this display of professional skill, was likely to produce on the spectators. (79)

During the fishing expedition, the judge fears that "'there will soon be ill blood'" between Ben Pump and Billy Kirby, for, as he explains, "'Benjamin is a fearless boaster, and Kirby...thinks one American more than a match for six Englishmen'" ; the judge also marvels "'that Dickon is silent, where there is such a trial of skill in the superlative!'" (255) Ben and Kirby's quarrel, we should note, concerns the respective merits of fresh and sea water. The turkey shoot in chapter seventeen brings into "open collision" the "jealous rivalry, on the point of skill with the rifle" (191) between Natty Bumppo and Billy Kirby. The scene also offers a glimpse into the the beginnings of the emulation process:

> All the boys in the village...stood gathered around the more distinguished marksmen...listening eagerly to the boastful stories of skill that had been exhibited on former occasions, and were already emulating in their hearts these wonderful deeds in gunnery. (190)

Judge Temple's housekeeper, Remarkable Pettibone, who would like "to level all human distinctions" (169), resents Elizabeth Temple's return to preside over the judge's household, because the housekeeper thinks "That the idea of being governed, or of being compelled to pay the deference of servitude, was absolutely intolerable" (168). The overall mood of the novel is one of hostility, resentment, and rivalry--a fact that underscores the mimetic nature of the characters' interactions.

Richard Jones, the judge's cousin, a notable citizen of Templeton and eventually its sheriff, is the novel's worst example of mediated behaviour. It is no exaggeration to say that Richard is so much the epitome of self that virtually every one of his actions is calculated to draw more gratifying attention to himself by impressing the other settlers with his showmanship, his apparently inexhaustible skills, and his seemingly unsurpassed achievements in architecture, medicine, surgery, music, religion, fishing, hunting, and horses. When he acccompanies the judge and Elizabeth back to the village, Richard suddenly devotes his whole attention "to a display of his horsemanship, to the admiration of all the gaping women and children, who thronged the windows, to witness the arrival of their landlord and his daughter" (57). Such is Richard's typically disruptive stance throughout the novel: he frequently tries to steal the show by re-directing the spectators' attention onto himself. Richard's sense of self is totally dependent on the gaping admiration of the onlookers. He does not, however, realize that, in what the novel calls his "zeal for pre-eminence" (180), he has enslaved himself to his audience's expectations.

In a conversation with Elizabeth in chapter sixteen, Richard lays out the fundamental principles governing his, and to a great extent the judge's, conduct in the Templeton community:

> 'Why, 'duke is your father, Elizabeth, but 'duke is a man who likes to be foremost, even in trifles. Now, as for myself, I care for no such things, except in the way of competition; for a thing which is of no moment in itself, may be made of importance in the way of competition. So it is with your father, he loves to be first; but I only struggle with him as a competitor.'
>
> 'It's all very clear, sir,' said Elizabeth; 'you would not care a fig for distinction, if there were no one in the world but yourself; but as there happen to be a great many others, why you must struggle with them all--in the way of competition.'
>
> 'Exactly so...' (180-81)

The striking thing about this crucial passage is its explicit emphasis on the role of the mediator in the lives of the prominent citizens of Templeton; the object of desire is relegated to the background, while the mediator assumes his importance in the foreground. It is with such a view of experience that Richard struggles with his cousin over the ownership of Aggy, the black slave; gloats over the chance to humiliate the judge for pretending to have killed the deer (56); envies Natty's skills with the rifle, while lamenting this "'damn'd envious world'" (54); and burns with "his desire for a participation in [John Mohegan's] glory" (88).

When Richard is made sheriff, the law becomes a means of giving his self-importance a certain ceremonial air, and his excessive and anarchic desires take on legal significance. During the numerous scenes of seemingly senseless destruction of the county's natural resources, the sheriff makes sure he is not outdone by any other settler. To display his shooting abilities, for example, he fires a cannon during the pigeon massacre in chapter twenty-two; in the next chapter, he scoffs at what he calls the judge's "'nibble, nibble, nibble'" ways in fishing, and, in what constitutes a parody of communal effort, sets out with other members of the settlement to catch hundreds of fish, most of which will be left to rot on the shore. But what has generally been considered irrational waste turns out to have been the result of Richard's excessive desire for social glory. In short, the determination to achieve recognition by triumphing over one's real or imagined rivals dominates the very process of settling Templeton.

Most commentators on The Pioneers see the significance of the novel in the conflict between Judge Temple and Natty Bumppo, when the latter shoots a deer out of season; the thematic centre of the narrative, they argue, lies in the contrast between Natty's natural freedom and the judge's attempts to impose social law on the settlement. The real conflict in The Pioneers, it seems to me, is between Natty's restraint and self-sufficiency and Richard Jones's subversive and rampant desires.

In the strong wave of change that has engulfed Templeton, Natty Bumppo's strong principles, his integrity, his solid sense of himself, and what the novel calls his "natural right" (112) to the place represent a clear contrast to Richard's vacuous pretensions to social eminence. Natty's 'right' and his self-definition are rooted in the history of the county, in his bravery, his proven skills, and in his harmonious relationship with nature--unlike Richard, Natty appropriates only so much of natural bounty as he can personally use.

Richard's fascination with 'display,' with 'fronts,' and with 'power' makes him Natty's real opposite. Such a fascination indicates Richard's intrinsic hollowness, his lack of being, and his total dependence on spectators; in effect, Richard Jones exists only when there are people to look at him.

The opposition between the two men becomes the focus of the last few chapters, when Richard, "burning with a desire" to examine the old man's cabin, leads his forces to assault Natty's stronghold. Richard's claim that Natty "has set an example of rebellion to the laws, and has become a kind of out-law" (355) is largely a justification for the sheriff's injured pride, when he sees that his authority and social importance are openly challenged by Natty's resistance.

In Natty Bumppo, the novel presents a way of life that is passing and that is being replaced by Richard's spirit of contention and intense competitiveness. Natty, living significantly on the outskirts of the village, finds himself outside the current of change and outside the social laws governing the lives of the settlers in Templeton; and, as Natty's melancholy voice makes itself less and less audible in the world of The Pioneers, Richard Jones's loud and boastful voice is to be heard everywhere in the settlement.

Cooper's novel is not a record of a happy time when American settlers lived in harmony with nature, as D. H. Lawrence suggests. The settlers did live close to nature, but only in a strictly physical sense. The Pioneers is, among other things, a record of a tumultuous time when the settlers in Templeton competed with one another for social conspicuousness.

Just as setting does not, therefore, play a decisive role in the pioneers' lives, the Bowery environment, generally regarded as the most important feature of Maggie, the next novel to be considered in this study, becomes less significant when we examine the preoccupation of Crane's characters with the concept of social respectability.

Ever since Stephen Crane himself wrote in a copy of Maggie: A Girl of the Streets which he sent to Hamlin Garland that the book "tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless,"[25] the novel has often been treated for its historical significance as a pioneer work of the naturalistic movement in American literature; it is said to deal realistically and straightforwardly with the sordid life of the slums. As an extreme form of realism, naturalism resulted from the adaptation of the principles of scientific determinism to literature. According to these principles, man is a weak and helpless animal subject to internal and external forces beyond his control.

In one sense, Maggie is about environment, for the novel abounds in descriptions of violence, drunkenness, fights, squalor, corruption, and prostitution. But, as Donald Pizer correctly observes,

> The novel is not so much about the slums as a physical reality as about what people believe in the slums and how their beliefs are both false to their experience and yet function as operative forces in their lives.[26]

When examined closely, these beliefs suggest the importance of human mediation in the lives of the Bowery people. The intense desire for social recognition, the strong need to prove to others that one is respectable, virtuous, great, or physically desirable, constitutes the real subject of Crane's novel. For instance, in chapter two, when Jimmie strikes his sister, his father, who is taking the children back home, cries, "'Stop that, Jim, d'yeh hear? Leave yer sister alone on the street.'"[27] Crane's irony, discernible in Mr. Johnson's prepositional phrase, exposes the father's misdirected concern; like the major characters in the story, he tries to give the outside world the impression that his family enjoys a sense of decency and respectability, and that his children are well-behaved because they have been well brought up.

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[25] Stephen Crane: Letters, eds. R. W. Stallman and Lillian Gilkes (New York: New York UP, 1960) 14.
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[26] Donald Pizer, "Stephen Crane's Maggie and American Naturalism," Criticism 7 (1965): 169.

This way of thinking, which stresses a character's preoccupation with how he is seen by the others, constitutes a recurring pattern in Crane's novel. It can again be discerned in Maggie's relationship with Pete, the flashy bartender. On his first visit to the Johnsons' home, Pete shows himself for what he really is: a poseur, keenly aware of his audience. As Jimmie and he are exchanging tales descriptive of their prowess, Pete suddenly takes note of Jimmie's sister, and

> As he became aware that she was listening closely, he grew still more eloquent in his descriptions of various happenings in his career. It appeared that he was invincible in fights.... He walked to and fro in the small room, which seemed then to grow even smaller and unfit to hold his dignity, the attribute of a supreme warrior. (19)

Maggie is taken in by such tales of bravery, but the reader is not because the ironic intention of the passage is clearly meant to expose Pete's vanity and undermine his inflated self-importance. The extra 'eloquence' reflects his deliberate desire to impress the inexperienced Maggie by his seemingly inordinate bravery.

And, of course, he succeeds, because, as Girard notes, "The sudden prestige which [the subject] gives to an unfamiliar way of life always coincides with his meeting a being who awakens this desire."[28] Maggie now begins to transfigure her object of desire as she "marvelled at [Pete] and surrounded him with greatness. She vaguely tried to calculate the altitude of the pinnacle from which he must have looked down upon her" (19). Her perception of her whole life and its surroundings is also forever altered:

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[27] Stephen Crane, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, ed. Thomas A. Gullason (New York: Norton, 1979) 7. Subsequent references are from this edition.

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[28] Girard 53.

> The broken furniture, grimy walls, and general disorder and dirt of her home of a sudden appeared before her and began to take a potential aspect. Pete's aristocratic person looked as if it might soil. She looked keenly at him, occasionally, wondering if he was feeling contempt. (18-19)

And when Pete has left, Maggie's imagination grows even more fertile:

> Maggie contemplated the dark, dust-stained walls, and the scant and crude furniture of her home. A clock, in a splintered and battered oblong box of varnished wood, she suddenly regarded as an abomination. She noted that it ticked raspingly. The almost vanished flowers in the carpet-pattern, she conceived to be newly hideous. Some faint attempts she had made with blue ribbon, she now saw to be piteous. (20)

Maggie is experiencing a common phenomenon: by contrast, Pete's 'aristocratic' being brings out her smallness and the insignificance and shabbiness of her surroundings. The intensity, indeed the violence, of her reaction--which can be discerned in such terms as 'soil,' 'contempt,' 'abomination,' 'raspingly,' 'hideous,' and 'piteous'--reflects Maggie's heightened new awareness of her being. Because mimetic desire is exclusively concerned with the realm of appearance and display, Maggie's new consciousness is correspondingly aesthetic. She comes to believe that the flashy Pete would perhaps not care for her; in fact, she has already lost to Pete what Girard calls "the struggle of consciousnesses."[29] Her desires are no longer self-inspired, for, "As thoughts of Pete came to Maggie's mind, she began to have an intense dislike for all her dresses" (25). Pete, who has now become her mediator, has begun to suggest to Maggie feelings and desires she did not have before. Maggie's initial reaction to Pete's 'greatness' and her desire to make her appearance, dress, and person meet with his approval enslave her to further mediation and prepare the stage for her sexual surrender to him.

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[29] Girard 111.

Bent on proving her desirability to Pete, Maggie fails to realize that his 'aristocratic' situation is spurious because Pete, unable to enjoy his 'greatness' by himself, feels compelled to display it to others; when, in chapter twelve, he takes Maggie to a bar, Pete derives a keen satisfaction from other men's admiring glances at his girl: "At times men at other tables regarded the girl furtively. Pete, aware of it, nodded at her and grinned. He felt proud" (39).

When he has seduced and abandoned Maggie, Pete retreats into the air of respectability of the bar in which he works. In a very brief chapter devoted to Pete's rejection of Maggie's plea for help, Crane uses the word 'respectability' six times to reduce Pete's desire for respectability to a convenient justification for irresponsibility and cruelty. Pete's moral poses turn out to be hypocritical shams adopted to save himself and to deceive others.

The Johnsons' reaction to Maggie's 'fall' indicates how much their concern is for their public image, not for Maggie's plight. Crane makes Jimmie's hypocrisy and his extreme self-centeredness obvious: "Of course Jimmie publicly damned his sister that he might appear on a higher social plane" (42). And his suggestion to his mother that they allow Maggie to return home is not the result of any generous feelings on his part either: "'it 'ud be better if we keep dis t'ing dark, see? It queers us! See?.... deh way it is now she can queer us! Don' che see?'"

(40-41). Jimmie's fear of ridicule and his apprehension lest his family appear 'queer' to their neighbours blind him to his inability to understand his sister's ordeal. The desire to secure the good name of the family far outweighs any wish to help Maggie. Even with Jimmie, who has fought her on numerous occasions and who has witnessed her various stages of drunkenness, Mrs. Johnson, for her part, strongly clings to her illusion of respectability:

> 'What! Let 'er come an' sleep under deh same roof wid her mudder agin!... Shame on yehs, Jimmie Johnson, fer sayin' such a t'ing teh yer mudder--teh yer own mudder! Little did I t'ink when yehs was a babby playin' about me feet dat ye'd grow up teh say sech a t'ing teh yer mudder--yer own mudder.' (40)

That Mrs. Johnson should formally call her son by his full name indicates the mother's tactic of making him feel guilty for having momentarily forgotten the importance of their family name. Mrs. Johnson goes on to adopt the same moral posture when her neighbours, the mediators, ask about her daughter's whereabouts: "Maggie's mother," Crane writes, "paced to and fro, addressing the doorful of eyes, expounding like a glib showman at a museum" (48). The simile works well to suggest the mother's insincerity and her theatricality.

Among Crane's numerous critics, only Donald Pizer has come close to identifying the phenomenon of mediated conduct in _Maggie_:

> The moral values held by the Johnsons are drawn almost entirely from a middle class ethic which stresses the home as the center of virtue, and respectability as the primary moral goal. It is a value system oriented toward approval by others, toward an audience.... The Johnsons' moral vision is dominated by moral roles which they believe are expected of them. The roles bring social approbation, and they are also satisfying because the playing of them before an audience encourages a gratifying emotionalism or self-justification.[30]

The widespread view which considers environment as both shaping force and destructive power in the book and which sees in Maggie's 'fall' and death a dramatization of man's pathetic weakness in the face of cosmic power does not do justice to the novel's pervasive irony and ignores the deceptive and self-deceiving theatricality of the main characters in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, a theatricality adopted for the mediators' sake.

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[30] Pizer 171.

To classify Maggie, therefore, under the convenient and extremely elusive label of naturalism is to overlook the work's peculiar and dynamic structure; it is a failure to perceive and to unravel the complex process of strategies and delusions that underlies the characters' desire in Crane's work. But Maggie is not the only novel to suffer under such a reductive categorizing. As the next section on The Rise of Silas Lapham demonstrates, the real subject of Howells's novel is not the mere realism of objects, but the much richer and more fascinating "realism of human relations."[31]

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[31] Bruce Bassoff, "Interview with Rene Girard," Denver Quarterly 13 (Summer 1978): 28.

The reputation of William Dean Howells has suffered much from the charge of many modern critics that Howells's scope was too limited. It is argued, for example, that his insights into human nature were based on tenets no longer applicable to the complex realities of the present. Howells's unwillingness to deal with sex and violence in his work and his characters' failure to experience intense passions and obsessions are cited as evidence. But to support such charges is to underestimate the nature of Howells's achievement and to endorse the view that a writer's subjects should be dictated to him by the critic; and as Henry James reminds us in _The Future of the Novel_, "We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his _donnee_: our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it."[32]

Execution of the subject is what Howells should be judged on; and, in this respect, a careful examination of _The Rise of Silas Lapham_, the author's most popular work and in many ways his masterpiece, will show that the novel, in spite of the criticism that its plot is too thin, is in fact rich in intense passions and overwhelming obsessions, and that Howells's moral vision of life is universal and possesses both depth and breadth.

The Rise of Silas Lapham tells the story of a man who has been led astray from the honest values of his simple life in Vermont by the corrupting influence of wealth; more specifically, the corruption begins when the Laphams attempt to emulate the Coreys' sophisticated way of life--that is to say, when they fall victims to mimetic desire.

In the interview he gives Bartley Hubbard in the opening chapter, Silas Lapham explains why he decided not to sell his parents' old farm in Vermont:

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[32] Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in _The Future of the Novel_, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Vintage Books, 1956) 17.

> 'All my brothers went West and took up land; but I hung on to New England, and I hung on to the old farm, not because the paint-mine was on it, but because the old house was--and the graves.... Had a family meeting there last year; the whole connection from out West.'[33]

The juxtaposition of the graves, a symbol of the past, and the paint, the agent for the future, points to the threat that personal ambition and social opportunities represent to Lapham's family tradition. For the time being, however, the hold of the ancestors and the importance of place are still strong, and Lapham's identity is powerfully rooted in the past; he is proud of his firm sense of continuity and of the family values of devotion and love. Indeed, these are the values that have so far shielded the Laphams from outside influences. Chapter two stresses the fact that the Laphams, although now living in cosmopolitan Boston after having left Vermont and its natural environment to follow the fortunes of their paint, still make up a strong family unit, self-reliant, self-sufficient, and at peace with themselves and with one another. They have, for example, managed to live quite contentedly, for twelve years, in the same place in Nankeen Square, where their relationship to nature is more or less still preserved: "They had seen the saplings planted in the pretty oval round which the houses were built flourish up into sturdy young trees" (20). Each of the Laphams also enjoys a strong inward self:

> They had not a conceit of themselves, but a sort of content in their own ways that one may notice in certain families. The very strength of their mutual affection was a barrier to worldly knowledge; they dressed for one another; they equipped their house for their own satisfaction; they lived richly to themselves ... (22)

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[33] William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, ed. Edwin H. Cady (Boston: Houghton, 1957) 7. Subsequent references are from this edition.

The striking thing in this passage is the way in which the Laphams' life seems free from external human influences; the family appears to enjoy its solidarity and its tranquil existence in its own small garden of Eden. In a very real sense, the rest of the story demonstrates how such a peaceful way of life is upset when the hold of the past is weakened and the Laphams become obsessed with the idea of getting into Boston society; the intrusion of the Coreys into the Laphams' life precipitates hitherto unkown social adventures.

However, the Laphams' social rise and their coming to Boston have already brought out new attitudes and different habits in the family; for instance, Howells notes,

> [The Lapham daughters] were not girls who embroidered or abandoned themselves to needle-work. Irene spent her abundant leisure in shopping for herself and her mother, of whom both daughters made a kind of idol, buying her caps and laces out of their pin-money, and getting her dresses far beyond her capacity to wear. Irene dressed herself very stylishly, and spent hours on her toilet every day.... They all three took long naps every day, and sat hours together minutely discussing what they saw out of the window. (21-22)

The money from the paint is beginning to make the family idle, wasteful, and vain; it has also turned Mrs. Lapham into a model for her daughters.

While family unity has helped protect the Laphams from outside influences, it has also made them socially ignorant, now that the money has suddenly begun to come in abundantly, and they do not know what to do with it:

> A certain amount could be spent on horses, and Lapham spent it; his wife spent on rich and rather ugly clothes and a luxury of household appointments.... they decorated their house with the costliest and most abominable frescoes; they went upon journeys, and lavished upon cars and hotels; they gave with both hands to their church and to all the charities it brought them acquainted with; but they did not know how to spend on society. (21)

Money catches the Laphams unprepared and takes them into hitherto unexplored walks of life, where, as Howells suggests, they lack taste and discrimination to guide them in their spending. The Laphams are also socially shy: they "had no skill or courage to make themselves noticed.... They lurked helplessly about in hotel parlours, looking on and not knowing how to put themselves forward" (22). In short, because the Laphams are too rustic for the sophisticated city fashion, they are also ripe for the process of emulation, the next step in their social rise.

It is precisely at this point that the human mediators make their appearance in the Laphams' existence. The effects of such an intrusion on the family unit are far-reaching: to begin with, they will be stampeded into building a new house in the more fashionable Back Bay district of Boston.

Everett Carter has observed that "Howells wrote [The Rise of Silas Lapham] about a house, the building of which becomes, in almost every respect, neatly symbolic of the moral rise and material fall of its builder, Silas Lapham."[34] The house is indeed one of the central symbols of the novel, but the question as to how the Laphams first conceived the idea of building on the Back Bay has generally been overlooked. The answer can be traced back to the ramifications of an important but chance encounter between the Laphams and the Coreys, a fashionable Boston family. In chapter two, Howells explains how

> The fact that [the Laphams] lived in an unfashionable neighbourhood was something that they had never been made to feel to their personal disadvantage, and they had hardly known it till the summer before this story opens when Mrs. Lapham and her daughter Irene had met some other Bostonians far from Boston, who made it memorable. They were people whom chance had brought for the time under a singular obligation to the Lapham

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[34] Everett Carter, Howells and the Age of Realism (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1954) 164.

> ladies, and they were gratefully recognisant of it. (20)

The intrusion of the Coreys into the Laphams' lives has often been seen as Howells's means of adding a romantic dimension to enrich an otherwise thin plot. More importantly, however, the encounter between the two families marks the beginning of the Laphams' fall into mimetic desire; it is as if they are discovering the realm of feelings for the first time, and, as a consequence, their awareness of themselves and of the outside world finds itself suddenly and decidedly altered.

For example, the reaction of Irene, the younger daughter, in whom young Tom Corey appears interested at first, is significant; before Tom's appearance, Howells remarks,

> If she dressed well, perhaps too well, it was because she had the instinct of dress; but till she met this young man...she had scarcely lived a detached, individual life, so wholly had she depended on her mother and her sister for her opinions, almost her sensations. She took account of everything he did and said, pondering it, and trying to make out exactly what he meant, to the inflection of a syllable, the slightest movement or gesture. In this way she began for the first time to form ideas which she had not derived from her family. (22-23)

Irene's natural tendency to follow her 'instinct of dress,' even if she sometimes overdresses, will now become a thing of the past. Her scrupulous attention to Tom's words and gestures reflects her intense fascination with the ideas and suggestions of her new acquaintance; later in the story, she never fails to run to acquire any book Tom happens to praise. The fact that Irene and her family are socially awkward makes them all the more impressionable and vulnerable to external suggestions. The mother herself, as she tells her husband, is equally impressed with the Coreys:

> 'Well, I can tell you that if you think they were not the nicest people you ever saw, you're mightily mistaken. They had about the best manners; and they had been everywhere, and knew everything. I declare it made me feel as if we had always lived

> in the backwoods. I don't know but the mother and the daughters would have let you feel so a little, if they'd showed out all they thought; but they never did; and the son--well, I can't express it, Silas! But that young man had about perfect ways.' (23)

Mrs. Lapham admires the Coreys' manners and worldly knowledge, precisely two qualities she and her family lack. Unable to articulate the extent of her clear admiration and secret envy, Mrs. Lapham resorts to superlatives and absolute statements, thus revealing the distance between her family and the Coreys. And the latter have already planted the seeds of desire in her mind; in talking about her new friends, Mrs. Lapham feels ashamed of her way of living, because the Coreys' sophistication has made her feel like a savage. In a way, because she cannot ignore what she now knows, her words remind one of Othello's when seeds of doubt are planted in his mind: "O now, forever/ Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!"

As the intimacy between the two families increases, so does the effect of mediation; the next time the Coreys visit, the Lapham pride is seriously wounded:

> In the winter [Mrs. Corey and her daughters], who returned to town very late, came to call on Mrs. Lapham. They were again very polite. But the mother let drop, in apology for their calling almost at nightfall, that the coachman had not known the way exactly.
>
> 'Nearly all our friends are on the New Land or on the Hill.'
>
> There was a barb in this that rankled after the ladies had gone; and on comparing notes with her daughter, Mrs. Lapham found that a barb had been left to rankle in her mind also. (24)

The simple and direct folk from Vermont are suddenly thrust into 'the struggle of consciousnesses' and the realm of insinuations. Mrs. Corey is suggesting that nobody who is anybody knows the Laphams because they live both literally and figuratively on the margin of Boston society; they are "in the wrong neighbourhood" (25), as Mrs. Lapham herself tells her husband later. Twelve years of contented existence in Nankeen Square are abruptly put into question. The mediator suggests even the place where the Laphams should build if they want to gain acceptance into Boston society.

For his part, Silas Lapham is dimly aware that what his family lacks is style; he is, however, too proud to actually admit the fact, even to his wife:

> 'Guess we could live [on Beacon Street] pretty much as we live here. There's all kinds of people on Beacon Street; you mustn't think they're all big-bugs.... You can have just as much style as you want, or just as little. I guess we live as well as most of 'em now, and set as good a table. And if you come to style, I don't know as anybody has got more of a right to put it on than what we have.' (27)

Lapham's 'right' to style reflects his unbounded faith in the power of his money, reduces his understanding of 'style' to keeping servants and setting a good table, and shows what a crude braggart he really is.

However, in spite of his apparent indifference to Beacon Street, Lapham is already contemplating the social success that a fine house may bring, particularly if it ensures his acceptance into the world of the Bromfield Coreys and if it makes him one of the "Solid Men of Boston" (3). Clearly, until the appearance of the Coreys, Lapham had never been so motivated by so much external display.

His view of Tom Corey's interest in one of his daughters indicates how secretly but mightily delighted he is with a possible connection with the young man's family:

> He could see the young people [Tom and Irene] down on the rocks, and his heart swelled in his breast. He had always said that he did not care what a man's family was, but the presence of young Corey as an applicant to him for employment, as his guest, as the possible suitor of his daughter, was one of the sweetest flavours that he had yet tasted in his success. He knew who the Coreys were very well, and, in his simple, brutal way, he had long hated their name as a symbol of splendour which, unless he

> should live to see at least three generations of his descendants gilded with mineral paint, he could not hope to realize in his own.... Nothing had moved his thick imagination like this day's events since the girl who taught him spelling and grammar...had said she would have him for her husband. (74-75)

Howells's somewhat patronizing comments bring out the extent of Lapham's inward satisfaction with the prospects of an alliance with an aristocratic family, since his daughter's marriage would move him closer to his mediators, who appear to enjoy the kind of magnificent existence that Lapham had always envied. Indeed, Lapham's ultimate desire is to be like Bromfield Corey, to enjoy the latter's "worldly splendour" (119); but because of his pride, Lapham would not acknowledge the fact, when he recounts to his wife how Bromfield has actually thought it proper to pay him a visit in his paint office: "'There's no sort of business about him. I don't know just how you'd describe him.... Didn't seem to be dressed very much, and acted just like anybody'" (118). But, as Howells elaborately explains, Lapham is not telling the whole truth of how awed and elated he actually was by such a call:

> He was not letting his wife see in his averted face the struggle that revealed itself there--the struggle of stalwart achievement not to feel flattered at the notice of sterile elegance, not to be sneakingly glad of its amiability, but to stand up and look at it with eyes on the same level. God, who made us so much like himself, but out of the dust, alone knows when that struggle will end. The time had been when Lapham could not have imagined any worldly splendour which his dollars could not buy if he chose to spend them for it; but his wife's half discoveries, taking form again in his ignorance of the world, filled him with helpless misgiving. A cloudy vision of something unpurchasable, where he had supposed there was nothing, had cowed him in spite of the burly resistance of his pride. (118-19)

Bromfiel's visit has enabled Lapham to catch a glimpse of the impalpable and unpurchasable realm of culture and manners that lies beyond the visible world of extravagance and display; he is beginning to sense that his own insistence on wealth and will-power as the sole bases for reputability and pride is rather naive, and that money cannot really bridge the aesthetic and intellectual distance separating him from Bromfield Corey.

Although Bromfield is referred to as a study in 'sterile elegance,' the man commands respect and admiration for his integrity and judiciousness. He is neither condescending nor arrogant, just as he honours neither family prejudice nor social prestige, and for all his social standing, unlike Silas Lapham, he does not have an inflated sense of himself: as he reminds his strongly class-conscious wife, "'There was a long time in my misguided youth when I supposed myself some sort of porcelain; but it's a relief to be of the common clay, after all, and to know it'" (83).

Lapham's glimpse of the aesthetic, intellectual, and moral qualities of his model proves too short to have any lasting effect on what Howells calls Lapham's "thick imagination" (75). He remains convinced that Bromfield's abstention from work represents an honorific and meritorious act, and a clear proof that his model can afford elegance and splendour. Lapham's belief makes the mediator's life of leisure even more attractive. And, before he can overcome his gross appetites and control his overwhelming social obsession, Lapham must be taught lesson after lesson.

The dinner party in chapter fourteen, the most frequently discussed scene of the novel, serves the double function of revealing the Coreys' snobbishness and the Laphams' mimetic behaviour. As one critic has correctly observed, "by exposing the Laphams, the Coreys hope to save themselves from an alliance with a family that neither speaks grammatically nor has the habit of wine at table."[33] The Coreys' invitation is indeed a calculated move, since, as Mrs. Corey and her daughters agree, "it would be perfectly easy to give the dinner just the character they chose, and still flatter the ignorance of the Laphams" (141). The mother and her daughters are determined to dazzle their unsuspecting guests and to cow them into a social retreat.

The invitation produces confusion and panic among the Laphams; the mutual affection that used to unite them is giving way to disagreements and role-playing. Mrs. Lapham's reaction, for example, reflects uncertainty and social awkwardness:

> She did not find it so simple a matter to accept the invitation. Mrs. Corey had said "Dear Mrs. Lapham," but Mrs. Lapham had her doubts whether it would not be a servile imitation to say "Dear Mrs. Corey" in return; and she was tormented as to the proper phrasing throughout and the precise temperature which she should impart to her politeness. (147)

The Coreys' influence is drawing Mrs. Lapham into the sphere of artifice and gesture, while it is making her comically but intensely self-conscious.

Her husband, for whom the invitation signals the realization of his social ambition, is obviously delighted at the chance to dine with the Coreys, while claiming all along that he is acting only in Irene's interest:

> He had determined not to say anything more about the matter before the girls, not choosing to let them see that he was elated; he tried to give the effect of its being an everyday sort of thing, abruptly closing the discussion with his order to Mrs. Lapham to accept; but he had remained swelling behind his newspaper during her prolonged struggle with her note. (147)

And to his wife, who suggests that they can all just send some excuse at the last moment if they do not want to go, Lapham braggingly replies, "'I guess we can carry out, and I guess we shan't want to send any excuse.... If we're ever going to be anybody at all, we've got to go and see how it's done'" (147). Lapham's naivety can be discerned in his notion that social greatness, as he understands it, can be both seen and copied.

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[33] John E. Hart, "The Commonplace as Heroic in _The Rise of Silas Lapham_," _Modern Fiction Studies_ 8 (Winter 1963): 380.

The Laphams' determination to demonstrate that they are the Coreys' equals forces them to try to dress according to their hosts' expectations; but the attempts turn out to be both comic and inadequate. Mrs. Lapham, for example, reveals her fears to her husband: "'I don't know what I'm going to wear; or the girls either. I do wonder--I've heard that people go to dinner in lownecks. Do you suppose it's the custom?'" (148) Lapham, who pretends to be unmoved by the anxiety and agitation of his wife and daughters, suggests their buying imported dinner dresses, thus revealing once again his habit of relying on money and experts to make up for his and his family's lack of taste.

As feverish preparations for the dinner are under way in his household, Lapham continues in his pretense; but, as Howells notes, "Finally, all that dress-making in the house began to scare him with vague apprehensions in regard to his own dress" (149). When his family suggests that he too buy himself an imported dress-coat, he scoffs at the idea, assuring them that he does not really care about how he dresses. But, with the hour of the formal dinner drawing nearer and the Coreys' influence growing stronger, Lapham's sense of reality is lost, his judgment is paralyzed, and his pretense can no longer be maintained:

> He held out openly, but on his way home the next day, in a sudden panic, he cast anchor before his tailor's door and got measured for a dress-coat. After that he began to be afflicted about his waistcoat, concerning which he had hitherto been

> airily indifferent. He tried to get opinion out of his family, but they were not so clear about it as they were about the frock. It ended in their buying a book of etiquette, which settled the question adversely to a white waistcoat. The author, however, after being very explicit in telling them not to eat with their knives, and above all not to pick their teeth with their forks--a thing which he said no lady or gentleman ever did--was still far from decided as to the kind of cravat Colonel Lapham ought to wear: shaken on other points, Lapham had begun to waver also concerning the black cravat.
>
> Drops of perspiration gathered on Lapham's forehead. He groaned, and he swore a little. (150)

Lapham's desire for social recognition is turning into a long ordeal. For all his anxiety and the suddenness of his movements, Lapham remains remarkably passive, like a puppet whose actions are precipitated by outside invisible forces. Indeed, the most striking thing about the above passage is its emphasis on Lapham's inability to be the author of his own choices. Besides exposing Lapham's social inadequacies, the passage works, more importantly, to show him in the grip of imitative desire; his being afflicted and shaken, his wavering, groaning, and swearing, and his perspiration and panic strongly point to Lapham's serious concern with what the Coreys think of him. In desperation over the problem of what kind of gloves he should wear, and whether he should wear them in the first place, Lapham eyes Tom Corey for inspiration: "He had an awful longing to find out from Corey how he ought to go" (150).

Lapham's social ordeal intensifies with the dinner party. After committing a few social blunders on his way to the Coreys' dining-room, he at last "fetched a long sigh of relief when he sank into his chair and felt himself safe from error if he kept a sharp lookout and did only what the others did" (156). The dinner party includes several incidents clearly intended to liken his behaviour to that of a monkey; for instance, Howells tells us,

> Bellingham [one of the guests] had certain habits which he

> permitted himself, and one of these was tucking the corner of his napkin into his collar; he confessed himself an uncertain shot with the spoon, and defended his practice on the ground of neatness and common-sense. Lapham put his napkin into his collar too, and then, seeing that no one but Bellingham did it, became alarmed and took it out again slyly. (156)

Bellingham's idiosyncrasy makes him both eccentric and comic, but the real intention behind the anecdote, it seems to me, is to render the mimetic process in its crudest form; and it is incidents such as these that help us see through Lapham's social pretentions.

As Lapham perceives it, the dinner party represents his opportunity to shine among the Coreys and their likes by showing his mediators that he, Silas Lapham, is capable of "holding his end of the rope" (167), as he phrases it. After succeeding in monopolizing the conversation, he, therefore, embarks on telling the company about his new house, his mineral-paint, his business successes, his war experiences--punctuating his dramatic monologue with hammering his arm-chair with the thick of his hand for emphasis. And, "After this proof of his ability to interest them," Howells explains,

> he would have liked to have Mrs. Lapham suggest again that he was unequal to their society, or to the society of anybody else. He surprised himself by his ease among men whose names had hitherto overawed him.... He told Charles Bellingham that he liked him, and assured James Bellingham that it had always been his ambition to know him, and that if anyone had said when he first came to Boston that in less than ten years he should be hobnobbing with Jim Bellingham, he should have told that person he lied.... Ten years ago he, Silas Lapham, had come to Boston a little worse off than nothing at all...and here he was now worth a million, and meeting you gentlemen like one of you.
>
> He was in this successful mood when word came to him that Mrs. Lapham was going. (169)

Now that Lapham is drunk, his carefully hidden anxieties and desires are brought into the open; in fact, Lapham's rambling drunkenness may be regarded as the novelist's appropriate device to reveal his character's compulsive need for recognition. Lapham is convinced he has achieved his ambitions, since he has been able to move, as he thinks, from being 'overawed'--with the religious suggestion that the Coreys and their friends had at one time been his idols--to feeling comfortable in their presence. However, in his zeal to impress his auditors with his massive achievement, Lapham ends up oppressing and embarrassing the company with his arrogance, condescension, and impropriety.

Although he realizes, when he wakes up in "the cold grey light of the [next] morning" (171), that, because of his conduct, he has failed miserably to achieve social recognition, Lapham begins to understand something of self; and his realization is cast in moral terms, for he now sees that his feeling of humiliation comes from what Howells calls "the sense of wrong" (174); he understands that in his determination to prove that he is a gentleman, he has actually brought shame on himself, on his family, and on his host; as he admits to Tom Corey, "'I was the only one that wasn't a gentleman there! I disgraced you! I disgraced my family! I mortified your father before his friends!... I showed that I wasn't fit to go with you'" (171-72). The force of Lapham's exclamations reflects the strength of his new awareness; his words contradict his former pretensions to gentility and represent an unequivocal renunciation of his former bragging self. This recognition engenders a new relationship to himself and to others: he is no longer concerned only with his self-gratification, and his vision has broadened to include the feelings of people around him. He also bravely accepts the fact that, though he is 'worth a million,' he, more importantly, lacks the propriety and manners to be a true gentleman.

The destruction of Lapham's still unfinished Beacon Street house, the symbol of his former social obsession, may be regarded as a continuation of the process of self- discovery: the fire has effectively consumed an extension of Lapham's former self, so to speak. John E. Hart rightly notes how

> [Howells's] interpretation [of human nature] in The Rise of Silas Lapham follows the form and pattern long used for the hero of myth and romance: heroism is a discovery of self that involves the hero in an unmistakable ordeal that amounts to a symbolic dying and rebirth.[36]

Lapham's humiliating drunkenness, the destruction of his new house, and a series of other financial disasters work well to diminish the braggart's self-importance. In the last few pages of the story, we meet a much-changed Lapham, whose "bragging note," Howells remarks, "[is] rarely sounded" (290), and who, in the last paragraph of the novel, appropriately describes his understanding of his 'rebirth' to Mr. Sewell, the minister: "'Seems sometimes as if it was a hole opened for me, and I crept out of it'" (299). In a real sense, Lapham has emerged from the imprisoning fantasies of his pride, and if he has lost his fortune, he has also gained the knowledge that his integrity and humility are worth more. He now comes to understand that social distinctions, like monetary ones, often have little relevance to true value. After shaking himself free from the hold of Boston society, Lapham returns to Vermont, to be at peace with himself and with his family, and no longer a victim of his social pretensions. Howells's The Rise of Silas Lapham is, as several critics have pointed out, concerned with Lapham's financial fall and moral rise; but, as I have tried to show, the novel can also be read in terms of Lapham's experience with mediated desire, an experience that also involves a fall and a rise.

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[36] Hart 375.

II. Sister Carrie's Kingdom of Greatness

> Trite though it may seem, it is well to remember that in life, after all, we are most wholly controlled by desire. The things that appeal to desire are not always visible objects. Let us not confuse this with selfishness. It is more virtuous than that. Desire is the variable wind which blows now zephyrlike, now shrill, filling our sails for some far-off port, flapping them idly upon the high seas in sunny weather, scudding us now here, now there, before its terrific breath, speeding us anon to accomplishment; as often rending our sails and leaving us battered and dismantled, a picturesque wreck in some forgotten harbor.[1]

It is by now well established that desire constitutes the real subject of Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie, and indeed of his other major novels. Several important critics of American literature have established this fact. For example, in an article significantly entitled "Desire as Hero," Randolph Bourne claims that "The insistent theme of Mr. Dreiser's work is desire, perennial, unquenchable.... His hero is really not Sister Carrie, or the Titan or the Genius, but that desire within us that pounds in manifold guise against the iron walls of experience."[2] Irving Howe, in his "Dreiser: The Springs of Desire," finds that "In Dreiser's early novels most of the central characters are harried by a desire for personal affirmation, a desire they can neither articulate nor suppress."[3] Donald Pizer is more specific about what Sister Carrie, for example, actually desires: "Of the major forces in her life, it is primarily her desire for objects that furnish a sense of physical and mental well-being--for fine clothing and furniture and attractive apartments and satisfactory food--which determines much of her life."[4] Walter Benn Michaels, for his part, observes that in Dreiser's novel "What you are is what you want, in other words, what you aren't."[5] Finally, a comprehensive study of Dreiser's work, published only four years ago, begins the section on Sister Carrie thus: "Desire is the protagonist of Sister Carrie. The principal supporting players include a young small-town girl drawn by undefined dreams to the great city and the men she meets during her search for fulfillment."[6]

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[1] Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie (U of Pensylvannia P, 1981) 97. Subsequent references are from this edition.
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[2] Randolph Bourne, "Desire as Hero," in Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser, ed. Donald Pizer (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981): 243-44.
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[3] Irving Howe, Decline of the New (New York: Harcourt, 1970) 140.

These various views rightly stress the importance of desire in Dreiser's work, particularly in Sister Carrie, where desire is perceived as an irrepressible, unfathomable, and overwhelming power over which the character has virtually no control. In fact, the character appears so passive and helpless that desire, according to Lawrence Hussman Jr., has become the novel's new protagonist. This subordination of character to desire is also what Richard Poirier suggests when, describing what he thinks characterizes most American novelists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he points out that "their vision often moves panoramically across the massed phenomena of social and economic structures, and it is only within these that they can see the hero at all."[7]

While I agree with these views on the centrality of desire to Dreiser's thought, I want to suggest that the phenomenon of desire in Sister Carrie is really not as unfathomable as we are asked to believe;

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[4] Donald Pizer, "Late Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism," Sister Carrie, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Norton, 1970) 572.

[5] Walter Benn Michaels, "Sister Carrie's Popular Economy," Critical Inquiry 7 (Winter 1980): 382.

[6] Lawrence E. Hussman, Jr., Dreiser and His Fiction: A Twentieth-Century Quest (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1983) 18.

[7] Poirier 213.

when carefully considered, desire in this novel is not some kind of mysterious and overpowering force that hurls Carrie Meeber, its subject, toward the objects she desires. Within the 'massed phenomena of social and economic structures,' we can clearly perceive the prominent place occupied by the human mediator. Sister Carrie, along with a host of other characters in the novel, thoroughly dramatizes Rene Girard's concept of mediated behaviour: Carrie desires an 'object,' not for itself, but for the importance lent to it by the desire of another character. My purpose is, therefore, to isolate and show the relevance of the pattern of mediation that heavily underlies the dynamics of desire in Sister Carrie.

To be subject to mediation means to imitate another person's actions or desires. Dreiser himself is aware that his characters cannot really escape mediation, and, as we shall see later, he clearly suggests Carrie's need for a good model, well before the events of her story are under way. Carrie's desires and her very self-definition are invariably affected by her experiences with Drouet, Hurstwood, and Ames; various other minor characters, who make up the rest of her human environment, also contribute to shaping her conduct both in Chicago and in New York. With the notable exception of Ames, whose significance will be explained later, the rest of the other characters are also, very much like Carrie herself, subject to mediated desire.

Despite its title, Sister Carrie is not a study of a family; indeed, the story opens as Sister Carrie is leaving her home in Columbia City to go to seek her fortune in Chicago. Her departure thus abruptly severs her already fragile links to the past, and, as Dreiser indicates, "the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken" (3). In fact, in the light of the absence of any subsequent references to Carrie's past, it seems doubtful that one can speak of her ever having been rooted. In her life in the city, the influence of Carrie's family and background seems to be virtually non-existent. She seems to have no sustaining tradition to guide her at all, and, in a very real sense, Carrie is a character with no effective past.

While this kind of freedom and mobility theoretically enables Carrie Meeber to 'create' herself and to acquire her distinct identity, it also makes her intensely susceptible to outside suggestions and influences that her life in big cities like Chicago and New York will inevitably bring; so that her situation at the outset of the novel is, as Dreiser points out, full of danger, for

> The city has its cunning wiles... There are large forces which allure, with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human.... Half the undoing of the unsophisticated and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman.... Without a counselor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations, what falsehoods may not these things breathe into the unguarded ear! (4)

The passage makes clear Dreiser's conviction that someone like Carrie, who has no tradition to rely on and who is, furthermore, "possessed of a mind rudimentary in its power of observation and analysis" (4), needs a good and reliable model to explain to her the seemingly bewildering and intimidating 'wonders' and attractions of Chicago. In other words, Carrie needs a friend to guide her safely through the various temptations and to save her from the dangers of the city. But, as I hope to show in the next few pages, the so-called 'superhuman' forces of the city can be ultimately traced to the strategies, deceptions, misunderstandings, and conflicts that underlie the relationships between the novel's characters.

The first words literally whispered in Carrie's ear as her train is approaching Chicago come not from a friend but from Charles Drouet, a flashy travelling salesman, who quickly manages to find out that Carrie is not familiar with Chicago and that she is indeed on her first visit to the city. This initial meeting is significant, for it reflects Drouet's habit of asserting his importance through boasting and display; for instance, he uses his knowledge of Chicago to impress an inexperienced country girl:

> 'You want to see Lincoln Park,' he said, 'and Michigan Avenue. They are putting up great buildings there. It's a second New York, great. So much to see--theatres, crowds, fine houses--oh you'll like that.' (7)

Drouet's real motive in this outburst is to impress on Carrie his familiarity and association with the 'great' world of the city, and to intimate that he regularly partakes of the delights and pleasures of Chicago--a city, he suggests, busy imitating New York.

Drouet's glamorous account inevitably affects Carrie, for the description makes the sights and attractions of Chicago seem indeed desirable; as Dreiser accurately observes, "There was a little ache in her fancy of all he described. Her insignificance in the presence of so much magnificence faintly affected her" (7). The seeds of desire, discernible in her 'ache' and in her sense of her own 'insignificance,' are so firmly planted in Carrie's imagination that she grows suddenly and inescapably conscious of her appearance; thus, after having studied Drouet's elegant dress, "She became conscious of an inequality. Her own plain blue dress with its black cotton tape trimmings realized itself to her imagination as shabby. She felt the worn state of her shoes" (7). Carrie's new perception springs from dissatisfaction, for in contrast to

Drouet's showy dress, the simplicity of Carrie's apparel is amplified to become shabbiness. The jump from the descriptive and neutral term 'plain' to an evaluative word like 'shabby' corresponds to Carrie's abrupt movement toward self-consciousness; as Girard points out, "it is the mediator who makes the imagination fertile."[8]

However, at this point in their relationship, Carrie does not yet realize that Drouet is merely a poseur, whose "dress or manners," Dreiser tells us, "are such as to impress strongly the fancy, or elicit the admiration of susceptible young women" (5). Just as Carrie will henceforth try to measure up to Drouet's standards of dress by imitating his elegance, Drouet himself dresses and behaves so as to conform to the expectations of young women like Carrie; Drouet and Carrie are thus caught in the process of mutual mediation.

Before they arrive in Chicago, Drouet has one more decisive card to play:

> He reached down in his hip pocket and took out a fat purse. It was filled with slips of paper, some mileage books, a roll of green-backs and so on. It impressed her deeply. Such a purse had never been carried by any man who had ever been attentive to her before. Indeed a man who traveled, who was brisk and experienced and of the world, had never come within such close range before. The purse, the shiny tan shoes, the smart new suit and the air with which he did things built up for her a dim world of fortune around him of which he was the centre. (8-9)

Once again, as in his reiteration of the word 'great' in the earlier example, Drouet's appeal appears simple and somewhat crude: the purse looks 'fat,' the 'roll of green-backs' is clearly visible, the new suit is 'smart,' and the tan shoes are strikingly 'shiny.' If Carrie appears deeply impressed, it is because of her inexperience; and under the circumstances, we should, therefore, not be surprised if the style with which Drouet does things seems to her to be that of an experienced man of the world. Carrie also feels flattered that she should come so close to such a desirable mediator. This first encounter ends naturally in favour of Drouet, who knows how to arouse Carrie's interest; in this episode, Dreiser himself appears perfectly aware of the workings of mimetic desire:

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[8] Girard 87.

> How true it is that words are but vague shadows of the volumes we mean. Little audible links they are, chaining together great inaudible feelings and purposes.... [Drouet] could not tell how his luring succeeded. She could not realize that she was drifting, until he secured her address. Now she felt that she had yielded something--he, that he had gained a victory. Already they felt that they were somehow associated. Already he took control in directing the conversation. His words were easy. Her manner was relaxed. (9)

Drouet and Carrie's association cannot be considered a master-slave relationship, but the fact remains that Carrie has now become virtually dependent on him. In a way, she has lost what Girard calls the 'struggle of consciousnesses' when she has succumbed to Drouet's strategies, to what Dreiser has earlier identified as the 'cunning wiles' of the city, the 'wholly superhuman' and 'large forces which allure' the unsophisticated mind. But the episode also goes to show that these 'superhuman' powers correspond in reality to the profound effects of human mediation.

Carrie's strong dependence on Drouet can again be seen at the end of the first chapter, as Drouet takes his leave and Carrie goes to meet her sister at the station: "She felt something lost to her when he moved away. When he disappeared she felt his absence thoroughly. With her sister she was much alone, a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea" (12). Carrie seems like a child abandoned, and the gap created by the absence of the 'charming' Drouet can hardly be filled by Minnie, who is, in sharp contrast to him, both "dull and commonplace" (13).

In fact, from now on, Carrie will consistently resort to Drouet's 'high' standards to evaluate and judge the people she meets and the places she goes to. At the back of her mind, Drouet's approval or disapproval will generally determine what she thinks and even what she does. For instance, when she reaches Minnie's flat, we are told that "Something about the place irritated her, she did not know what. She only knew that [the] things [in the flat], to her, were dull and commonplace" (13). Dreiser tries to explain this irritation by attributing it to Carrie's "sixth sense" and to her vague and undeveloped sense of harmony; he thinks that, though she is "Too ignorant to understand anything about the theory of harmony, Carrie yet felt the lack of it" (13). But, when carefully considered, her reaction stems from her encounter with Drouet; Carrie is actually ashamed to let Drouet, whom she has asked to call on her at her sister's, see where she resides. Even though she has given him Minnie's address, she suddenly thinks to herself that "He could not come here.... My sister's place is so small" (14); Carrie's reasoning suggests that she worries about what Drouet will think of the flat and in what unfavourable light she herself will appear to him. As we shall see later, Carrie will experience a similar feeling of shame when she decides to avoid seeing Mrs. Vance, her wealthy New York neighbour, rather than give her the address of the small and plain apartment she shares with Hurstwood.

This feeling of shame, strongly indicative of mediated desire, consistently informs Carrie's job-seeking experience in Chicago as well. It is fair to say that Carrie appears really more concerned with her public image than with finding a job; with her eyes on the mediators, she often loses sight of what she should be after. For example, we are told that "As she contemplated the wide windows and imposing signs [on a busy Chicago street], she became conscious of being gazed upon and understood for what she was--a wage-seeker" (18). In the world of internal mediation in which virtually anyone can become someone's mediator, Carrie has made the 'mistake' of openly revealing her desire, of clearly showing that she badly needs a job. But she quickly moves on to her next strategy, and

> To avoid conspicuity and a certain indefinable shame she felt at being caught spying about for some place where she might apply for a position, she quickened her steps and assumed an air of indifference supposedly common to one upon an errand. (18)

The quick steps are provoked by the gaze of the mediator, and the assumed air of indifference, itself imitated, fails to conceal Carrie's preoccupation with what other people think of her; and, under the circumstances, her conduct becomes both ridiculous and unprofitable, for, as Dreiser goes on to explain, "In this way [under the indifferent air] she passed many manufacturing and wholesale houses without once glancing in" (18). For Carrie, looking for a job has turned into a virtual flight from the mediators, and the object of desire itself has been put aside, so that physical desire has unexpectedly become metaphysical.

Because Carrie is under the sway of mimetic desire, she invariably considers herself either insignificant or miserable whenever she encounters people who seem to her to be superior models; she compares herself to them and repeatedly concludes that they enjoy a self-sufficiency of which she remains deprived. For instance, when, in chapter three, her job-hunting adventures take her into a fashionable Chicago store,

> Not only did Carrie feel the drag of desire for all of this which was new and pleasing in apparel for women, but she noticed, too, with a touch at the heart, the fine ladies who elbowed and ignored her, brushing past in utter disregard of her presence, themselves eagerly enlisted in the materials which the store contained. (23)

Such an experience heightens Carrie's self-awareness, particularly her realization of her unimportance. Irving Howe's notion that the characters in Dreiser's early novels suffer from a "desire for personal affirmation" is correct and can be said to describe Carrie's situation well; such a notion, however, overlooks the role of human mediation in the characters' need for 'affirmation.' For instance, it does not take into consideration the mechanism apparent in the fine ladies' haughty conduct toward Carrie, and in her own envious perception of them. For Carrie, personal affirmation can only be attained when she is no longer treated as if she did not exist. Her desire is, therefore, for recognition, and not, as Donald Pizer thinks, merely for clothes and material comfort. In this respect, the subsequent episode with the shop girls in the same store is worth examining:

> Carrie was not familiar with the appearance of her more fortunate sisters of the city. Neither had she before known the nature and appearance of the shop girls, with whom she now compared poorly. They were pretty in the main, some even handsome, with a certain independence and toss of indifference which added ... a certain piquancy.... [W]herever she encountered the eye of one, it was only to recognize in it a keen analysis of her own position--her individual shortcomings of dress and that shadow of *manner* which she thought must hang about her and make clear to all who and what she was. A flame of envy lighted in her heart. (23)

To be intensely conscious of one's appearance is to be in the grip of mediated desire, to engage in constant mental comparisons between oneself and other people. In her estimation, Carrie feels that, in comparison to the 'fine' ladies and even to the shop girls, she lacks 'being' and that her very identity seems transparent. At the source of Carrie's strong subjectivity, we, therefore, come to see the human mediators' overwhelming significance. Her flame of envy is all too logical under the circumstances, for she wants to acquire what makes those girls superior: their metaphysical qualities of independence, indifference, and piquancy.

Carrie's low self-estimate colours even her understanding of other people's behaviour. In chapter six, for example, when Drouet, who had promised to call on Carrie at her sister's, has apparently forgotten to keep his word, she quickly jumps to the conclusion that "Drouet was not coming and somehow she felt a little resentful, a little as if she had been forsaken--was not good enough" (52); Drouet's neglect serves to reinforce Carrie's low opinion of herself. But her reading of Drouet's action is actually absurd when we recall that she had earlier written to him expressly asking him not to call on her at Minnie's embarrassingly small flat.

At other times, however, Carrie's mere connection with Drouet makes her feel superior to other women and also to their men. At the shoe factory where she eventually gets her first job, Carrie has to work alongside girls who "had young men of the kind whom she, since her experience with Drouet, felt above... She [also] came to thoroughly dislike the light-headed young fellows of the shop" because "Not one of them had a show of refinement" (56), and "who beside Drouet seemed uncouth and ridiculous" (40). Once the refined and sophisticated Drouet has established or pointed out what seems desirable, Carrie will settle for nothing less. Thus, Carrie's perception of herself and of her human environment derives largely from her brief but momentous encounter with such a 'superior' model as Drouet.

But what is the exact nature of the superiority Carrie persists in attributing to Drouet? Is he really as 'great' and self-sufficient as she believes him to be? Or is he in fact as much a victim of mimetic desire as she? In chapter five, Dreiser explains why Drouet frequently spends his free evenings at Rector's, a famous Chicago restaurant:

> Rector's, with its polished marble walls and floor, its profusion of lights, its show of china and silverware, and above all its reputation as a resort for actors and professional men, seemed to him the proper place for a successful man to go. He loved fine clothes, good eating, and particularly the company and acquaintanceship of successful men. (42)

Dreiser leaves no doubt as to what attracts Drouet to Rector's; like Carrie, like all the characters who have helped to give Rector's its reputation, Drouet loves the company and acquaintanceship of the successful. He haunts the restaurant because his mediators' prestige seems imparted to the place. At the outset, therefore, the only difference between Carrie and Drouet is that she thinks he is 'successful.' But her perception is the result of her inexperience; so that as she gains experience the difference between them, as the novel amply shows later, dissolves, and with it goes her desire for his company.

That Drouet depends on the atmosphere of places like Rector's to feel himself alive is made abundantly clear in several other episodes of the story. We are told, for instance, that when Drouet dines out, "it was a source of keen satisfaction to him to know that Joseph Jefferson was wont to come to this same place at some time or another, or that Henry E. Dixey, quite a well-known performer of the day, was there only a few tables off" (42). In a real sense, Drouet is a vaniteux, one who, according to Girard, "will desire any object so long as he is convinced that it is already desired by another person whom he admires."[9] Drouet's intense satisfaction derives obviously not from the quality of the food but from his conviction that his temporal or spacial proximity to his mediators endows him with some of their prestige; to be dining at the same place as Joseph Jefferson or Henry E. Dixey makes Drouet feel he belongs to their 'glamorous' world. Because his desire is thus largely mediated, some of Drouet's actions become comic but also very revealing; at Rector's, for instance, he would sometimes overhear someone mention the presence of some popular figure, and "When these things would fall upon Drouet's ears, he would straighten himself a little more stiffly and eat with solid comfort. If he had any vanity, this augmented it, and if he had any ambition, this stirred it" (42). Drouet's mechanical reaction to the presence of his mediators reminds us of Carrie's quick steps when she realized other people were watching her as she was looking for a job. In the present instance, Drouet cannot really hide the imitative nature of his desire. The actions of straightening himself 'a little more stiffly' and of eating with 'solid comfort' have nothing spontaneous about them; the presence of the 'illustrious' mediators has brought them about. The passage also shows how Dreiser can sometimes intuitively comprehend and unambiguously portray the laws governing mimetic desire: he makes Drouet, the subject of desire, appear to be a puppet whose actions are automatically precipitated by the mediators' presence. In a perfect spirit of emulation, Drouet, Dreiser informs us, "would be able to flash a roll of greenbacks too someday. As it was, he could eat where they did" (42). Again, Drouet's ultimate desire remains social prestige, a display of his wealth.

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[9] Girard 7.

Another fashionable resort Drouet frequents is Hannah and Hogg's, "a gorgeous saloon from a Chicago standpoint" (42), as the novel describes it. The reasons for the place's popularity with Drouet and others of his type are worth considering because they ultimately point us, once again, to the mediator's role. Dreiser explains how

> The fact that here men gather, here chatter, here love to pass and rub elbows, must be explained upon some grounds. It must be that a strange bundle of passions and vague desires gives rise to such a curious social institution or it would not be.
>
> Drouet, for one, was lured as much by his longing for pleasure as by his desire to shine among his betters. (47)

Dreiser traces the existence of the saloon to a human environment made up of what he loosely designates as 'a bundle of passions and vague desires,' but Drouet's example shows us that desire for social recognition represents an essential element in the very creation of Hannah and Hogg's. The clear motive for the gathering and the rubbing of elbows is, therefore, to impress others and to prove oneself worthy of their attention. The relationship between Drouet's search for pleasure and his eagerness to shine among his betters indicates the movement from physical to metaphysical desire.

What ~~has been~~ said about Drouet applies equally to the numerous other people who are irresistibly drawn to the saloon; as Dreiser indicates,

> The many friends [Drouet] met here dropped in because they craved, without perhaps consciously analyzing it, the company, the glow, the atmosphere, which they found.... The worst effect such a thing could have would be perhaps to stir up in the material-minded an ambition to arrange their lives upon a similarly splendid basis. In the last analysis, that would scarcely be called the fault of the decorations, but rather of the innate trend of the mind. That such a scene might stir the less expensively dressed to emulate the more expensively dressed could scarcely be laid at the door of anything save the false ambition of the minds of those so affected. (47)

I will later examine in more detail Dreiser's attitude toward desire, but I point out here that his view of emulation seems ambivalent in this passage, for though he describes the tendency to imitate others--to arrange one's life upon their standards--as an inborn quality of the human mind in general, he also suggests that emulation remains the false ambition of a particular kind of mind, the kind permanently affected by desire, like Drouet's, for instance.

As far as Drouet is concerned, the 'innate trend of the mind' is forever at work. When he takes Carrie out to dinner, he carefully and purposefully "selected a table close by the window... He loved the changing panorama of the street--to see and be seen as he dined" (58). Mixed with Drouet's love of the varied street spectacle is his own desire to be noticed by others, to draw their attention to himself; and Drouet is more than just gregarious: the preceding example indicates how his self-esteem increases when he knows that other people, Carrie included, associate him with the city's fashionable public places.

Drouet's success with Sister Carrie and his power over her depend precisely on his ability to make her feel the elegance of his manners and the superiority of his taste; unable to perceive Drouet's limitations, Carrie continues to lead a major part of her life in Chicago according to his expectations. Perhaps one of the most telling examples of Drouet's influence over Carrie's actions occurs in chapter eleven, as Carrie and Drouet, who are now living together, are taking a walk for the first time:

> Drouet had a habit...of looking after stylishly dressed or pretty women on the street and remarking upon them.... He saw how they set their little feet, how they carried their chins, with what grace and sinuosity they swayed their bodies.... He would turn and follow the disappearing vision with his eyes.... He loved the thing that women love in themselves, grace. At this, their own shrine, he knelt with them, an ardent devotee.
>
> 'Did you see that woman who went by just now?' he said to

> Carrie, on the very first day they took a walk together.
>
> It was a very average type of woman they had encountered, young, pretty, very satisfactorily dressed so far as appearances went, though not in style. Drouet had never seen the perfectly groomed ladies of the New York social set, or he would have been conscious of her defects.
>
> 'Fine stepper, wasn't she?'
>
> Carrie looked again and observed the grace commended.
>
> 'Yes, she is,' she returned cheerfully, a little suggestion of possible defect in herself awakening in her mind. If that was so fine she must look at it more closely. Instinctively she felt a desire to imitate it. Surely she could do that too.
>
> When one of her mind sees many things emphasized and re-emphasized and admired, she gathers the logic of it and applies accordingly. Drouet was not shrewd enough to see that this was not tactful. He could not see that it would be better to make her feel that she was competing with herself, not with others better than herself. He would not have done it with an older, wiser woman; but in Carrie he saw only the novice. Less clever than she, he was naturally unable to comprehend her sensibility. He went on educating and wounding her, a thing rather foolish in one whose admiration for his pupil and victim was apt to grow. (99-100)

I am quoting the entire passage because the incident of the 'fine stepper' represents one of the novel's clearest illustrations of Rene Girard's concept of mimetic desire. Carrie, who suddenly finds the other woman's style of walking desirable because Drouet has commended it, yearns to appropriate to herself the sort of admiration the 'fine stepper' enjoys in the eyes of men like Drouet. But Carrie's struggle is really not with the other woman, but with Drouet, the mediator, who indirectly and unwittingly hints at his mistress's shortcomings by openly praising other women in her presence. Instead of "whisper[ing] cautious interpretations" (4), Carrie's self-appointed counselor incites her to emulation.

In addition to his insensitivity, to his being, in short, a bad counselor, Drouet is unable to hide or even restrain his admiration for women; he tends to reveal his desires too much, a habit indicative of his crude and tactless nature. But his desire retains its metaphysical dimension, as the terms 'grace,' 'shrine,' and 'devotee' indicate: what Drouet admires is not the woman herself, but her style, her manner of carrying and holding herself. Since Drouet generally cares to judge and be judged by appearance, his understanding of 'grace' and 'style' does not go beyond the level of externals and surfaces.

The superficiality of Drouet's perceptions and his being wholly controlled by his desires make it hard for Carrie to engage his attention for very long; her efforts in that direction cannot really succeed, for "Drouet was a man whom it was impossible to bind to any one object for long. He had but one idol--the perfect woman" (105). Because of her own pride and her determination to meet Drouet's standards of what constitutes the desirable, Carrie frequently finds herself copying whatever Drouet directly or indirectly recommends. The 'fine stepper' is not an isolated episode in the novel; chapter eleven provides us with another equally telling instance of Drouet's influence over Carrie's behaviour, when he praises their neighbour's daughter:

> What Drouet said about the girl's grace...caused Carrie to perceive the nature and value of those little modish ways which women adopt when they would presume to be something. She looked in her mirror and pursed up her lips, accompanying it with a little toss of the head as she had seen the railroad treasurer's daughter do. She caught up her skirts with an easy swing, for had not Drouet remarked that in her and several others, and Carrie was naturally imitative. She began to get the hang of those little things which the pretty woman who has vanity invariably adopts.
>
> She used her feet less heavily, a thing that was brought about by her attempting to imitate the treasurer's daughter. How much influence the presence of that young woman in the same house had upon her it would be difficult to say. (104)

Richard Poirier's argument that Dreiser "derive[s] his creative energy from a kind of fascinated surrender to the mysterious forces that in the city destroy freedom and even any consciousness of its loss"[19] surely overlooks Dreiser's ability to depict the complex but logical dynamics of imitation; Dreiser clearly identifies the process of emulation as a powerful shaping force in the heroine's life. If Carrie's freedom is destroyed, it is because her actions are not self-inspired, but copied from another's. As Dreiser suggests in the last sentence of the preceding passage, human influence, that is to say human mediation, constitutes an active agent in Carrie's actions. The examples of the 'fine stepper' and the treasurer's daughter show us that desire in Sister Carrie is not as unfathomable and mysterious as we are made to think.

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[19] Poirier 5.

Drouet's influence over Carrie leads her into a world of artifice, in which her gestures are conscious imitations of one woman or another's. However, such an influence cannot go on forever because Carrie soon begins to see through Drouet's limitations, particularly the crudity of his desires. Even if Drouet had earlier impressed Carrie with his apparent sophistication and his knowledge of the world, Dreiser has made the point several times that "In reality Carrie had more imagination than [Drouet] did, more taste" (69). Drouet's temporary power over Carrie can be traced back to her lack of a sustaining family tradition and, therefore, to her susceptibility to the external suggestions and pressures exerted by individuals such as Drouet. Only her inexperience had made her dependent on him, for, as Dreiser points out in chapter ten:

> She really was not enamoured of Drouet. A little living with him convinced her of that. She was more clever than he. In a dim way she was beginning to see where he lacked. If it had not been for this, if she had not been able to measure and judge him in a way, she would have been worse off than she was. She would have adored him. She would have been utterly wretched in her fear of not gaining his affection, of losing his interest, of being swept away and left without an anchorage. (92-93)

Carrie is experiencing what Girard describes as "metaphysical disappointment,"[11] a common phenomenon among the subjects of mimetic desire. Her experiences and familiarity with Drouet gradually help her to reduce him to his objective qualities. When she keenly felt her insignificance and desired Drouet's good opinion, she was eager to please him, embracing his high standards and obeying his slightest intimations; in other words, when Carrie was subject to Drouet's mediation, she was unable to see things clearly; her sense of Drouet's reality and importance was distorted. But, as often happens, the relationship between subject and mediator changes when the former's admiration for the latter begins to wane. Dreiser accurately predicts Carrie's eventual state had she not begun to perceive Drouet's weaknesses: mimetic desire would have enslaved her to him, he would have become her idol. Dreiser's speculation strongly reinforces Girard's observation that "This movement [of mimetic desire] toward slavery is one of the basic principles of novelistic structure."[12]

The presence on the scene of a new and apparently better model than Drouet contributes significantly to the change in Carrie's attitude toward Drouet. George Hurstwood, the manager of Hannah and Hogg's and the second man in Carrie's life, seems to her definitely superior to the first: "When Hurstwood called she met a man who was more clever than Drouet in a hundred ways.... [and whose] great charm was attentiveness" (93). In many respects, Hurstwood shows himself to be Drouet's opposite: far from wounding Carrie's sensibilities or suggesting her shortcomings, Hurstwood gives her his undivided attention and makes her feel both important and special. As we learn in chapter thirteen, Carrie is convinced of his difference from and superiority to Drouet:

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[11] Girard 88.

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[12] Girard 170.

> He seemed to radiate an atmosphere which suffused her being. He was never dull for a minute and seemed to make her clever. At least she brightened under his influence until all her best side was exhibited. She felt she was cleverer with him than with others. At least he seemed to find so much in her to applaud. There was not the slightest touch of patronage. Drouet was full of it. (117)

Even without Dreiser's repetition of the verb 'seemed,' we can still sense that Hurstwood is too attentive to Drouet's mistress; the truth is that the manager is purely and simply attracted to Carrie, a fact that neither she nor Drouet suspects at present. Hurstwood's elaborate strategy to gain Carrie for himself can be rightly regarded as part of what Dreiser calls the 'cunning wiles' of the city, the kind of thing for which Carrie needs a counselor's advice.

And Hurstwood is good at his game, for he knows both how to excite Carrie's interest and how to flatter her self-importance. Like a good teacher genuinely concerned with the progress and growth of his student, Hurstwood makes sure Carrie feels he is bringing out the best in her; at this initial stage, he appears indeed to be a good model, pointing out the best for his subject, and apparently willing to welcome Carrie into his radiant sphere of success and greatness. His encouragements and advice seem so unselfish that Carrie, in her desire to be special and to see herself applauded, is inevitably taken in by his flattery. But the manager's desire has still other major obstacles to contend with.

For one thing, Drouet now becomes Hurstwood's unsuspecting rival; in fact, in the overall structure of the novel, the interaction between the two men has to do largely with their rivalry over the heroine. For Hurstwood, Carrie becomes even more desirable because she belongs to another: "He envied the drummer his conquest as he had never envied any man in all the course of his experience" (122). The intensity of Hurstwood's envy reflects not only the strength of his desire for Carrie but also his keen awareness of his rival--envy being the inevitable outcome of two desires converging on the same object. Gradually, Hurstwood grows concerned more and more with the idea of triumphing over Drouet; and, in this respect, the manager's determined efforts to outwit Drouet may also be regarded as part of what the novel calls the 'cunning wiles' of the city. In chapter twelve, Hurstwood finally persuades Drouet to bring Carrie to a show:

> This pleased Hurstwood immensely. He gave Drouet no credit for any feeling towards Carrie whatever. He envied him, and now as he looked at the well-dressed, jolly salesman whom he so much liked, the cold gleam of the rival glowed in his eye. He began to size up Drouet from the standpoints of wit and fascination. He began to look to see where he was weak.... Drouet felt nothing. He had no power of analyzing the glance and the atmosphere of a man like Hurstwood. He stood and smiled and accepted the invitation, while his friend examined him with the eye of a hawk. (108)

Hurstwood's mediated desire turns him into an unscrupulous individual, concerned exclusively with himself; the animal imagery used to depict his tactics reflects the extent to which his desires have mastered him. His future dealings with Drouet will centre on how to outmaneuver his rival. To ensure his success with Carrie and his triumph over Drouet, Hurstwood resorts to cunning: he feigns indifference, hides his desire for Carrie, and plays the apparently uninterested but charming friend. Hurstwood's strategy reminds us of Girard's idea that "The secret of success, in business as well as in love, is dissimulation. One must hide the desire one feels and pretend a desire one does not feel. One must lie."[13] As the subsequent events of the story confirm, Hurstwood wins

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[13] Girard 107.

Carrie largely because he, unlike Drouet, is careful not to reveal his desires too quickly. At the show to which he has invited Drouet and Carrie, he adopts his decisive and wily attitude; when Drouet steps outside to get the evening's programme, Hurstwood and Carrie are left temporarily alone:

> Several times their eyes accidentally met and then there poured into hers such a flood of feeling as she had never before experienced. She could not for the moment explain it, for in the next glance or the next move of the hand there was seeming indifference mingled only with the kindliest attention. (110)

Hurstwood deliberately arouses Carrie's curiosity without really and openly revealing his desire; his assumed indifference perplexes her: she sees it as a sign of his superiority and an indication that perhaps she does not really matter to him. The effect of the manager's conduct is to make him desirable in Carrie's eyes, for when Drouet comes back,

> [He] shared in the conversation but he was almost dull in comparison. Hurstwood entertained them both and now it was driven into Carrie's mind that here was the superior man. She instinctively felt that he was stronger and higher and yet withal so simple. By the end of the third act she was sure that Drouet was only a kindly soul but otherwise defective. He sank every moment in her estimation by the strong comparison.... [Drouet] was not in the least aware that a battle had been fought and his defences weakened. He was like the Emperor of China who sat glorying in himself, unaware that his fairest provinces were being wrested from him. (110)

For Carrie, one model supplants another. When she first met Drouet, she thought her sister, Minnie, both dull and commonplace; in the present instance, Drouet himself appears dull and uninteresting when compared to the 'charming' manager. Carrie's new and unfavourable conception of her first acquaintance is 'driven' into her mind, that is, mediated through what she takes to be Hurstwood's superiority.

That Dreiser does not really share Carrie's high opinion of the manager can be easily demonstrated when we consider how the author actually sees his character. Dreiser's presentation leaves no doubt that, like Carrie and Drouet, Hurstwood, far from being superior, is himself a victim of mimetic desire. Like Drouet, the manager cares a great deal about the kind of impression he makes on people; but unlike Drouet's, Hurstwood's preoccupation and tactics are both deep and subtle. Dreiser finds the manager of Hannah and Hogg's "an interesting character after his kind. He was shrewd and clever in many little things and capable of creating a good impression" (43). Hurstwood's qualities--his shrewdness and cleverness--are socially oriented, their major purpose being to elicit a favourable reaction among his acquaintances; in other words, Hurstwood can be regarded as one of the novel's many actors, and only in this light can the feigned indifference, the strategies, and the overall conduct of "this starched and conventional poser among men" (105), as the novel calls him, be satisfactorily understood.

Hurstwood's poses can be best examined, in chapter twenty-nine, during the presence of some celebrities at his saloon:

> If Hurstwood had one leaning, it was toward notabilities. He considered that, if anywhere, he belonged among them.... In situations like the present--where he could shine as a gentleman and be received without equivocation as a friend and equal among men of known ability, he was most delighted. It was on such occasions, if ever, that he would 'take something.' When the social flavour was strong enough, he would even unbend to the extent of drinking glass for glass with his associates, punctiliously observing his turn to pay as if he were an outsider like the others. If ever he approached intoxication... it was when individuals such as these were gathered about him--when he was one of a circle of chattering celebrities. (266)

The passage indicates that only among his mediators, the Chicago notabilities, would Hurstwood feel himself at ease. Nevertheless, the unspoken but mild rivalry pervading the circle brings out the members' mediated actions: no one, Hurstwood included, lets himself be outdone in his ability to drink or to spend money on his friends.

For Hurstwood, to be a celebrity, to be in the public eye and enjoy the admiration and envy of many, seems the ultimate form of recognition. The nouns 'celebrities' and 'notabilities' and the verb 'shine' presuppose an audience and reflect the subject's strong awareness of this audience. In chapter nineteen, Dreiser remarks that "individuals love more to bask in the sunshine of popularity than they do to improve in some obscure intellectual shade. Merit is no object, conspicuity all. No one realized this better than Hurstwood" (173). As we shall see later, this intellectual dimension, the cultivation of the mind, so conspicuously lacking in the lives of the novel's major characters, remains an imagined possibility to be realized, if only partially, in young Ames. But, for practically every other character in Sister Carrie, social conspicuousness appears to be the pinnacle of greatness. And it is social eminence on a grand scale that Hurstwood achieves in chapter nineteen on the night of Carrie's first experience on the stage:

> The little theatre resounded to a babble of successful voices, the creak of fine clothes...all largely because of this man's bidding. Look at him any time within the half hour before the curtain was up;--he was a member of an eminent group--a rounded company of five or more, whose stout figures, large white bosoms and shining pins bespoke the character of their success. The gentlemen who brought their wives called him out to shake hands.... He was evidently a light among them, reflecting in his personality the ambitions of those who greeted him. He was acknowledged, fawned upon, in a way lionized. Through it all one could see the standing of the man. It was greatness in a way, small as it was. (180)

The social event can be legitimately considered one of the most emotionally fulfilling moments in Hurstwood's life, for, in an atmosphere of glamour and finery, his self-importance and his desire for celebrity are fully gratified: he is the centre of attention and king of the occasion. He even becomes, if only temporarily, everybody's mediator, symbolizing the ambitions of many people present. We should also note in passing that Dreiser's qualification of Hurstwood's greatness ("small as it was") does not really detract from his being attracted to this kind of public eminence.

Carrie's first stage experience proves significant for another reason. Her public acclaim, though mild, increases her desirability in Hurstwood's eyes, so much so that he proposes their living together in another part of Chicago. But Carrie, who is still sharing an apartment with Drouet, and who does not know that Hurstwood is married, will comply only if the manager is ready to marry her and move with her to another city. Carrie's reluctance fuels Hurstwood's feelings:

> When he looked at her now he thought her beautiful. What a thing it was to have her love him, even if it be entangling. She was something to struggle for, and that was everything. How different from the women who yielded willingly. He swept the thought of them from his mind. (149)

To understand the metaphysical nature of Hurstwood's desire, we should simply realize that what he wants to overcome is Carrie's frustrating objection. The more difficult the obstacle seems, the more intense Hurstwood's desire grows; in other words, the degree and quality of Carrie's resistance challenges, that is to say mediates, the manager's desperate willingness to sacrifice everything for her. In contrast, the women who let themselves be readily possessed seem unworthy of his efforts. In short, Hurstwood's desire for Carrie is essentially a desire for obstacles.[14]

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[14] A few pages earlier, we have another good example of the metaphysical nature of Hurstwood's desire. In chapter fifteen, while Drouet is away on business, the manager calls on Carrie and takes her out for dinner; but, as "She kept him at a distance...his interest was heightened. Now

Hurstwood's growing interest in Sister Carrie has a significant effect on Drouet's own feelings toward her, for his desire for her rekindles when he realizes that the manager finds Carrie attractive. In chapter ten, when Hurstwood pays him a visit,

> By his tact he made Drouet feel that he admired his choice. There was something in his manner that showed that he was pleased to be there. Drouet felt really closer to him than ever before. It gave him more respect for Carrie. Her appearance came into a new light, under Hurstwood's appreciation. (94-95)

To understand Drouet's new perception of Sister Carrie, we have to remember that, even before meeting Carrie, Drouet had often thought of Hurstwood as a model, one of the local celebrities whose attention he tried to attract whenever he went to Rector's; and when the manager had "been pointed out as a very successful and well-known man about town," Dreiser explains in chapter five, "Drouet immediately conceived a notion of him as being someone worth knowing and was glad not only to meet him but to visit the Adams Street bar thereafter whenever he wanted a drink or a cigar" (43). We can, therefore, trace Drouet's 'extra' respect for Carrie and the new light in which he sees her to Hurstwood's admiration of the drummer's choice. For Drouet, the manager's appreciation of Carrie amounts to an approving nod from the model.

The triangular relationship between Drouet, Carrie, and Hurstwood assumes a new shape after Sister Carrie's triumphant stage appearance in chapter twenty. For instance, we are told that, toward the end of the performance,

> The two men were in a most harrowed state of affection. They scarcely heard the few remaining words with which the scene

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[14](cont'd) that the game was only to be won by artifice, it seemed more and more entrancing. Her beauty was heightened for him by her aloofness" (133). The initial object of desire, Carrie's physical beauty, slips to a secondary position in Hurstwood's scale of desire: her aloofness, the distance she puts between them, absorbs his whole attention.

> concluded. They only saw their idol, moving about with appealing grace, continuing a power which to them was a revelation.
>
> Hurstwood resolved a thousand things--Drouet as well. (192-93)

The audience's applause intensifies the two men's love for Carrie and, as the religious terminology appropriately indicates, their desires reach into the metaphysical. Hurstwood decides that "He would act at once. This would be the end of Drouet and don't you forget it. He would not wait another day. The drummer would not have her" (193). And when he sees Drouet approaching Carrie, Hurstwood can scarcely restrain himself:

> Jealousy leaped alight in his bosom.... he hated him as an intruder.... Hurstwood found that he could not talk, repressed as he was, and grudging Drouet every moment of his presence.... Hurstwood set his teeth with envy. (186)

The audience's admiration for Carrie has a similarly profound effect on Drouet; he, too, is pushed into acting at once: "He was resolving that he would be to Carrie what he had never been before. He would marry her, by George. She was worth it" (192). In short, Hurstwood and Drouet desire Carrie not for herself but for the recognition given her by the public at large.

Although his own feelings toward Carrie intensify because another man finds her desirable, Drouet is initially unable to sense the change in her perception of him, now that her stage successes are bringing her more and more public recognition. However, with the apparent self-assurance Carrie derives from the audience's applause, she begins to feel she is no longer bound by Drouet's judgments; in chapter twenty, we are told that, after another triumphant performance,

> The little actress was in fine feather. She was realizing now what it was to be petted. For once she was the admired, the sought-for. The independence of success now made its first faint showing. With the tables turned, she was looking down, rather than up, to her lover. (193)

Clearly, social prestige regulates the dynamics of power in the novel's triangular relationship.

But to demonstrate that mimetic desire is not limited to the major characters, I would like to consider, if only briefly, the significance of some minor figures. Of the manager's wife, for instance, Dreiser tells us in in chapter nine that

> Mrs. Hurstwood was the type of the woman who has ever endeavored to shine and has been more or less chagrined at the evidences of superior capability in this direction elsewhere. Her knowledge of life extended to that little conventional round of society, of which she was not, but longed to be, a member. (82-83)

Just as the Chicago 'notabilities' mediate her husband's view of success, local Society exerts a great deal of influence over Mrs. Hurstwood's life. Envious because she knows she does not belong to Society, she hopes to satisfy her longing through her children:

> She was not without realization already that this thing was impossible, so far as she was concerned. For her daughter she hoped better things. Through Jessica she might rise a little. Through George Jr.'s possible success she might draw to herself the privilege of pointing proudly. (83)

As Mrs. Hurstwood's hopes indicate, mediation of desire makes a character extremely self-centred: one's children, like one's possessions, become a means to reach one's mediators.

But perhaps the best episode illustrating the mimetic nature of Mrs. Hurstwood's conduct is to be found in chapter sixteen, when she asks her husband to buy her a season ticket to the races. Dreiser's analysis of her motives strongly reinforces the view that human mediation determines the characters' thoughts and actions in Sister Carrie:

> The races in question...were considered quite society affairs.... Mrs. Hurstwood had never asked for a whole season ticket before, but this year certain considerations decided her to get a box. For one thing, one of her neighbors, a certain Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey... had done so. In the next place, her favorite physician, Dr. Beale, a gentleman inclined to horses and

> betting, had talked to her slightly concerning his intention to enter a two-year-old in the Derby. In the third place, she wished to exhibit Jessica, who was rapidly gaining in maturity and beauty, and whom she hoped to marry to a man of means. Her own desire to be about in such things and parade among her acquaintances and the common throng was as much an incentive as anything. (140-41)

Dreiser's observations indicate that, like the novel's central characters, Mrs. Hurstwood is compelled by personal forces, by social considerations, to prove that she can afford one of society's requirements; the races themselves she virtually ignores in her desire to associate with the fashionable crowd at the races.

The significance of this episode can be fully grasped when we find out in chapter twenty-one what Mrs. Hurstwood finally makes of that ticket:

> Jessica had called her attention to the fact that the races were not what they were supposed to be. The social opportunities were not what they had thought they would be this year. The beautiful girl found going every day a dull thing. There was an earlier exodus this year, of people who were anybody, to the watering places and Europe. In her own circle of acquaintances several young men in whom she was interested had gone to Waukesha. She began to feel that she would like to go too, and her mother agreed with her. Why shouldn't they. The fact of having secured a season ticket was nothing. (196-97)

The mother and her daughter suddenly perceive that the races have become uninteresting and lifeless, for the 'people who were anybody,' the mediators, have moved on and taken all the lustre and excitement with them; the slaves of the fashionable, therefore, must turn their attention from the races to holiday resorts. The season ticket incident serves another important function: it brilliantly demonstrates that what Veblen calls 'conspicuous consumption' conforms to Girard's idea of triangular desire.

As is already clear, Jessica is very much like her mother. Her aristocratic notions of life, as we learn in chapter nine, are derived from a particular set of individuals, whose company Jessica purposefully seeks:

> [Jessica] was still in the high school and had notions of life which were decidedly those of a patrician.... She met girls at the high school whose parents were truly rich and whose fathers had standing locally as partners or owners of solid businesses. These girls gave themselves the airs befitting the thriving domestic establishments from whence they issued. They were the only individuals of the school about whom Jessica concerned herself. (82)

Like the desires of several other characters in the novel, Jessica's desire is metaphysical: she longs to acquire her mediators' style. As Rene Girard points out, "The snob seeks no concrete advantage; his pleasures and sufferings are purely metaphysical."[18] In a conversation with her mother in chapter sixteen, Jessica reveals once again what is uppermost in her mind:

> "Did you know, mother," said Jessica another day, "the Spencers are getting ready to go away."
> "No. Where, I wonder?"
> "Europe," said Jessica. "I met Georgine yesterday and she told me. She just put on more airs about it."
> "Did she say when?"
> "Monday, I think. They'll get a notice in the papers--they always do."
> "Never mind," said Mrs. Hurstwood consolingly--"we'll go one of these days."
> "'We sail for Liverpool from New York!'" Jessica exclaimed, mocking her acquaintance. "'Expect to spend most of the "summah" in France'--vain thing. As if it was anything to go to Europe."
> "It must be if you envy her so much," put in Hurstwood. (142)

In spite of her pathetic attempts to parody Georgine's words, Jessica is, as her father correctly observes, envious because she feels her family cannot keep up with the Spencers. That she is constantly thinking about her mediators can be inferred from her never failing to notice what the papers have to say about the Spencers--the latter presumably making sure their friends and acquaintances know of their enviable excursions to Europe. Jessica's significance in the novel is of course minor, but her desire to associate with the rich girls of her school or to emulate the Spencers is simply a variation on a phenomenon already noticed among the major characters: their love of the company and atmosphere of the socially prominent. In short, the characters in Sister Carrie aspire to what Dreiser calls 'the kingdom of greatness.'

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[18] Girard 220.

The most desirable state the characters can imagine and the ultimate symbol of their social ambitions is the kingdom of greatness. Through the increasing worship of the visible value, the "great money kings" (304), who rule the kingdom, are the new mediators of everybody's desire. Because wealth is viewed as intrinsically honourable and as conferring prestige and superiority on its owners, it mediates between ordinary individuals and the desired ideal of behaviour. This mediation is what Dreiser often refers to as the 'social atmosphere' of the city and which he describes at length in chapter thirty-three:

> The great create an atmosphere which reacts badly upon the small. This atmosphere is easily and quickly felt. Walk among the magnificent residences, the splendid equipages, the gilded shops, restaurants, resorts of all kinds. Scent the flowers, the silks, the wines; drink of the laughter springing from the soul of the luxurious content, of the glances which gleam like light from defiant spears; feel the quality of smiles which cut like glistening swords and of strides born of place and power, and you shall know of what is the atmosphere of the high and the mighty. Little need to argue that of such is not the kingdom of greatness, but so long as the world is attracted by this and the human heart views this as the one desirable value which it must attain, as long, to that heart, will this remain the realm of greatness. So long, also, will the atmosphere of this realm work its desperate results in the soul of man. It is like a chemical reagent. One day of it, like one drop of the other, will so affect and discolor the views, the aims, the desires of the mind, that it will thereafter remain forever dyed. A day of it to the untried mind is like opium to the untried body. A craving is set which, if gratified, shall eternally result in dreams and death. Aye, dreams unfilled--gnawing, luring, idle phantoms which beckon and lead, beckon and lead, until death and dissolution dissolve their power and restore us blind to nature's heart. (305)

Dreiser seems fascinated by the atmosphere surrounding the wealthy, and his elaborate descriptions make the kingdom of greatness appear the epitome of luxury and splendour; the inhabitants of the kingdom have nothing else left to desire, for they have apparently reached the summit of happiness. The influence of their wealth is so formidable that their mere glances and smiles are as effective as deadly weapons. However, to talk about the aggressive and belligerent nature of those smiles and glances is to imply a deficiency, a fear, or some kind of insecurity, in 'the soul of the luxurious content.'

Dreiser finds the atmosphere in the 'kingdom of greatness' not only fascinating but, more importantly, compelling and even contagious; its permanent effects on ordinary people, whose views and ambitions it affects and discolours, are undeniably profound; the atmosphere is thus part of what the novel's opening chapter describes as the 'large forces which allure' and contribute to the undoing of the unsophisticated mind. As Walter Benn Michaels rightly reminds us in his article on Dreiser's novel,

> We are...so accustomed to identifying capitalism with some form of rugged individualism that it is extraordinarily difficult for us to see...what Sister Carrie exemplified--that the capitalism of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries acted more to subvert the ideology of the autonomous self than to enforce it.[16]

This gradual disintegration of self is, as Dreiser repeatedly points out in his portrayal of the realm of greatness, the result of desire--the desire to emulate the great.

Richard Poirier is partially right when he observes that Dreiser's creative energy derives from "a kind of fascinated surrender to the mysterious forces of the city," for we do get the impression that

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[16] Michaels 388.

Dreiser resignedly surrenders to the luring powers of the kingdom of greatness--only death, as he admits, can deliver one from the grip of desire. It is as if Dreiser is unable to imagine a way out of or a viable alternative to the imposing sway of desire. In fact, this failure explains why many readers find unconvincing the portrayal of Ames, whose function is supposedly to criticize the ethos of material success. The point I would like to reiterate here, however, is that these irresistible forces are neither mysterious nor impersonal: human beings, as the opening sentence of the preceding passage points out, are clearly at the centre of the city's imposing atmosphere.

Shortly after Carrie and Hurstwood move to New York, Carrie makes the acquaintance of a certain Mrs. Vance, "a typical New Yorker in many things," Dreiser says, "some of which were dressiness, jollity, love of metropolitan life, crowds, theatres" (320). Mrs. Vance's first invitation to Carrie proves unsettling to the latter, for, on comparing herself to Mrs. Vance, Carrie begins to see her own shortcomings:

> She...saw that she was not well-dressed--not really as well-dressed as Mrs. Vance.... Her situation was cleared up for her. She felt that her life was becoming stale.... The old helpful, urging melancholy was restored. The desirous Carrie was whispered to concerning her possibilities. (321)

Carrie's familiar pattern is at work again; her desires are rekindled in the presence of her friend, for the comparison to Mrs. Vance proves painful. When the two women decide to go for a walk down Broadway, Carrie feels once again the sense of her own insignificance, because, although "Carrie had gotten herself up charmingly enough...this woman pained her by contrast. Carrie felt that anyone looking at the two would pick Mrs. Vance for her raiment alone" (322). Carrie's new friend turns out to be both a model to emulate and a potentially frustrating rival.

But, as Dreiser points out in chapter thirty-four, Mrs. Vance herself is in the grip of mimetic desire:

> [The parade] was a familiar thing to Mrs. Vance, who not only knew of it as an entity, but had often been in it, going purposely to see and be seen, to create a stir with her beauty and dispel any tendency to fall short in dressiness by contrasting herself with the beauty and fashion of the town. (323)

Like Drouet, who enjoys seeing and being seen as he dines, Mrs. Vance is very much given to appearances, concerned with her public image, and is, therefore, compelled to dress in order to impress the onlookers. Mrs. Vance, it is fair to say, lives for the sake of the institutionalized showy parade. Again, like Drouet, Mrs. Vance tends to betray her mimetic conduct in the presence of her mediators; during their excursion down Broadway, Carrie "noticed of a sudden that Mrs. Vance's manner had rather stiffened under the gaze of handsome men and elegantly dressed ladies" (323). The stiffening reflects, as it did earlier in Drouet's case, the powerful effects of mediation.

Carrie remains, however, impressed by her friend's elegance and self-assurance, and the belief makes her feel both miserable and envious, for as she goes on to judge:

> The whole street bore the flavor of riches and show and Carrie felt that she was not of it. She could not, for the life of her, assume the attitude and smartness of Mrs. Vance, who in her beauty was all assurance. She could only imagine that it must be evident to many that she was the less handsomely dressed of the two. It cut her to the quick, and she resolved that she would not come here again until she looked better. At the same time she longed to feel the delight of parading here as an equal. Ah, then she would be happy. (324)

Carrie feels excluded from the apparent bliss enjoyed by her friend, and her happiness now depends on the kind of impression she too can produce on the onlookers in Broadway; acquiring Mrs. Vance's assurance will presumably give her a place in the showy street parade. But, as things are, "Broadway taught her a sharper lesson.... It clinched her convictions concerning her state. She had not lived, could not lay claim to having lived, until something of this had come into her life.... That night the pretty little flat seemed a commonplace thing" (325-26); as Dreiser puts it, "The great awakening blow had been delivered" (327). We recall a similar occurrence when, after her first meeting with Drouet, Carrie viewed her sister's place in Chicago as 'dull and commonplace.' In the case of Minnie's flat, Dreiser invokes what he calls "the theory of harmony" (13) to explain Carrie's reaction; but, as the present instance clearly demonstrates, Carrie's feeling of dissatisfaction in both cases results from her tendency to define her condition in relation to the apparent bliss enjoyed by some people around her--in short, mediation of desire effects her dissatisfaction. I want to stress the role of Mrs. Vance in Carrie's life because such an influence, ignored in most readings of the novel, is part of the city's atmosphere, part of the determining environment that forms character. Once again, it is human mediation that shapes Carrie's life in New York: "Her recent experiences with the Vances had wholly unfitted her to view her own state with complacence. The glamour of the high life...seized her completely" (345-46). And when Carrie feels that she cannot keep up with her friend's standards, she simply decides, out of a sense of shame, not to see Mrs. Vance any longer.

Carrie's sense of her insignificance is brought home to her once again when all she, a former popular Chicago actress, can get is the role of chorus girl in a New York theatre; when she compares herself to the famous actresses, Carrie considers herself a mere insect: "After a few days she had her first sight of those high and mighty--the leading ladies and gentlemen.... She saw that they were privileged and deferred to. She was nothing--absolutely nothing at all" (391).[17] In short, Carrie is yearning again for the kind of public recognition she once achieved in Chicago.

Through a diligent imitation of the more successful actors and a careful heeding of the critics' comments, Carrie eventually succeeds in entering the "walled city" (449), in becoming a stage celebrity; in chapter forty-seven, we are told that

> Gradually the deference and congratulations gave her a mental appreciation of her state. She was no longer ordered but requested, and that politely. The other members of the cast looked at her enviously .... All those who had supposedly been her equals and superiors now smiled the smile of sociability. (449-50)

Even though Carrie has become one of 'those high and mighty' she once envied, her perception of her own success is still largely determined by the public regard for her.

As if to show us the fluctuating dynamics of desire, and to explain the degree and extent of Carrie's rise, Dreiser reintroduces Mrs. Vance, whom Carrie used to perceive as a model but who now comes to offer her congratulations and pay homage to a rising star: "'But aren't you a success. Dear, oh! All the papers talking about you.... I was almost afraid to come back here this afternoon'" (454). Mrs. Vance's fear might perhaps sound comic, but it, nonetheless, reflects the change through which Carrie now becomes Mrs. Vance's mediator of desire.

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[17] Carrie's feeling that she amounts to nothing echoes Hurstwood's own similar feeling when he first arrives in New York; in chapter thirty-three, Dreiser notes that:

> Whatever a man like Hurstwood could be in Chicago, it is very evident that he would be but an inconspicuous drop in an ocean like New York.... The sea was already full of whales. A common fish must needs disappear wholly from view, remain unseen. In other words, Hurstwood was nothing. (304-45)

Because Carrie is, indeed, considered a model for the public at large, the shrewd manager of a new and fashionable New York hotel offers her a suite in his establishment at a special rate; as he candidly explains to Carrie in chapter forty-seven,

> 'Every hotel depends upon the repute of its patrons. A well-known actress like yourself...draws attention to the hotel, and, although you may not believe it, patrons. Now we must have repute. It is what we live on. The common run of individuals will go where celebrities are. Consequently we must have celebrities. You can see that yourself.' (451)

The real implications of Mr. Withers's theory can be best understood when we recall Drouet's inclination to go to Rector's because some celebrity was dining a few tables off, Hurstwood's leaning toward notabilities, Mrs. Hurstwood and her daughter's frantic pursuit of Chicago Society, and Carrie's desire to feel herself equal to the better-dressed ladies of Chicago and New York. Just as Hannah and Hogg's in Chicago exists because of 'a strange bundle of passions and vague desires,' the Wellington in New York relies for its success on the concept of mediated desire; Mr. Withers, the pragmatic manager, knows that the presence of illustrious individuals in his hotel enhances the attractiveness of the place in the eyes of the commmon people.

In a very real sense, Carrie Meeber of Columbia City appears to have reached the summit of material success, to have entered New York's 'kingdom of greatness': money, worldly advantage, and sensual gratification are hers at last. Dreiser explains that

> For her the doors of fine places seemed to open quite without the asking. These palatial chambers--how marvellously they came to her. The elegant apartments of Mrs. Vance in the Chelsea--these were hers. Men sent flowers, love notes, offers of fortune. And still her dreams ran riot. The one hundred and fifty! The one hundred and fifty! What a door to an Aladin's cave it seemed to be. (456)

Now that the heroine's dreams of power and glamour are apparently fulfilled, now that she has attained what she has often desired, the author is confronted with the phenomenon of desire in general: how does one contain desire, especially when Dreiser himself tells us that "in life, after all, we are most wholly controlled by desire" (97)? Because of the author's conviction that one cannot argue with desire, neither the grandiose imagery, nor the linking verbs, nor the repetition in the preceding passage can authenticate a clear difference between the character's and the author's perceptions of desire and material success. The closest Dreiser comes to solving this structural and thematic problem posed by Carrie's rampant dreams and to offering us an alternative to the 'realm of greatness' is in his introduction of Ames in the last few pages of the book.

Robert Ames, Mrs. Vance's cousin, is brought into Carrie's life appropriately at the height of her material success. Ames's most characteristic quality is his strong mind; Dreiser describes him as "an original thinker" who is "wholly free of affectation" (329). Sister Carrie is attracted to him precisely because of the beauty of his mind, for she feels "that he was better educated than she was--that his mind was better" (334); a page later, she realizes that "This man was far ahead of her. He seemed wiser than Hurstwood, saner and wiser than Drouet." Ames's appearance in Carrie's life makes her see the limitations of her earlier perceptions and the narrowness of her past experiences; she is thus able to move from her admiration of Drouet's elegance and Hurstwood's greatness to her respect for Ames's sanity and wisdom. If she finds the difference painful it is because most of her conduct in Chicago and New York has been strongly coloured by her association with the first two men in her life.

By introducing Ames toward the end of the novel, Dreiser is finally providing his heroine with a good model to emulate--a model whose superiority is one of essence, not merely of appearance. Carrie realizes that her new mediator "liked better books than she read, better people than she associated with. His ideal burned in her heart" (405). In other words, Ames's presence suggests to Carrie higher and better desires than she has so far pursued. For instance, she now comes to see that "Flattery in its most palpable form had lost its force with her. It required superiority--kindly superiority, to move her--the superiority of a genius like Ames" (432).

If Carrie's view of experience is beginning to change, it is because she has at last encountered what Dreiser earlier said she needed most: a counselor. When carefully considered, Ames's advice to Carrie does not incite her to imitate or compete with other women; it is simply meant to make her a better person. For example, she finds his praise of her acting "keen, strong, analytical.... He was dwelling upon her as having qualities worthy of discussion" (484). His criticism is so genuine that she feels as if "She could have kissed his hands in thankfulness" (484).

Ames's strength lies also in his definition of success; challenging Carrie's notion that success in love and fortune is everything anyone could want, he suggests that "'if a man doesn't make knowledge his object, he's likely to fail.... It's the man who fails in the mind who fails completely'" (482). His emphasis on mind is significant because, for him, mind has a direct bearing on desire.

Ames is the only character in the novel who has come to terms with the demands of desire, who knows how to contain desire, for his experiences have taught him a great deal about the relationship between happiness and desire; as he explains to Carrie in chapter forty-nine,

> 'When I was quite young I felt as if I were ill-used because other boys were dressed better than I was, were more sprightly with the girls than I, and I grieved and grieved, but now I'm over that. I have found out that everyone is more or less dissatisfied. No one has exactly what his heart wishes.' (482-83)

Ames could have become bitter and resentful, permanently dissatisfied with his condition because his young mediators were better-dressed and more successful in love than he. But Ames sees desire as part of human nature; however, he also realizes that desire needs limits, for, as he tells Carrie, "'the world is full of desirable situations'" (482). Therefore, the only way out of the labyrinth of desire is to accept that "'happiness is within yourself wholly if you will only believe it'" (482). In a sense, Ames is advising Carrie to derive her self-definition from within herself and to remember that "'The huzzas of the public don't mean anything'" (483), because greatness, as he sees it, relates to a person's "goodness" and cannot be purchased through "applause" (486).

Although we are told that, when Ames is gone, his ideal still remains with Carrie, especially his suggestion that "riches were not everything" (346), our last view of Sister Carrie in the concluding moments of the story undermines our expectations that she has fully grasped the import of Ames's advice:

> In her comfortable chambers at the Waldorf, Carrie was reading, at this time, "Pere Goriot," which Ames had recommended to her. It was so strong, and Ames's mere recommendation had so aroused her interest, that she caught nearly the full sympathetic significance of it. For the first time it was being borne in upon her how silly and worthless had been her earlier reading, as a whole. (495)

The heavy and predictable irony implicit in Carrie's ability to sympathize with suffering in books while she remains unaware that Hurstwood is dying not very far from her comfortable hotel chambers seems at odds with the implications of Ames's advice to Carrie and with the earlier suggestions that Carrie's mind has been aroused by her third major model of behaviour. The point has to be made, therefore, that if the phenomenon of desire does not seem to be satisfactorily explored and explained, it is because Dreiser himself seems ambivalent in his attitude toward the central subject of *Sister Carrie*: mediated desire.

III. The Society of Negatives in The House of Mirth

> 'It seems to me,' she said at length, 'that you spend a good deal of your time in the element you disapprove of.'
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> Selden received this thrust without discomposure. 'Yes; but I have tried to remain amphibious; it's all right as long as one's lungs can work in another air. The real alchemy consists in being able to turn gold back into something else; and that's the secret that most of your friends have lost.'
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> Lily mused. 'Don't you think,' she rejoined after a moment, 'that the people who find fault with society are too apt to regard it as an end and not as means, just as the people who despise money speak as if its only use were to be kept in bags and gloated over? Isn't it fairer to look at them both as opportunities, which may be used either stupidly or intelligently, according to the capacity of the user?'
>
> 'That is certainly the sane view; but the queer thing about society is that the people who regard it as an end are those who are in it, and not the critics on the fence. It's just the other way with most shows--the audience may be under the illusion, but the actors know that real life is on the other side of the footlights. The people who take society as an escape from work are putting it to its proper use; but when it becomes the thing worked for it distorts all the relations of life.'[1]

As this crucial conversation between the novel's central characters demonstrates, Edith Wharton's novel is primarily concerned with Society--more specifically, whether the characters perceive Society as an end in itself or as a means to something better. The intellectual exchange between Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden raises several other important questions: just what constitutes Society? What laws govern the relationships between its members? What enlightened use can one make of Society, and can the characters control their desire for social recognition? Why does not Selden's 'amphibious' nature protect *him* from the sway of social judgments in his most decisive actions in the story? In what ways does Society, when viewed as the ultimate object of human desire, pervert and falsify the natural relations of life? Finally, what is the significance of Lily's suicide at the end of the novel?

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[1] Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth (New York: Scribner's, 1905) 70. Subsequent references are from this edition.

These are only some of the issues I intend to address in the next pages. By examining the major characters' attitudes toward Society and by following the downward course of Lily's social journey, I hope to articulate the precise essence of fashionable New York society in the first few years of the 1900s. Though Lily Bart moves from one social group to another, we come to realize that the different segments of Society in Edith Wharton's novel are driven by one common passion: the insistent desire for social eminence.

In no way is the old aristocracy held up as a desirable model of behaviour. The narrative voice leaves no doubt about what really motivates the members of this class. As the story opens, Lily finds herself in the charge of her wealthy aunt, Mrs. Peniston. The circumstances surrounding Mrs. Peniston's decision to take care of her niece represent a convincing and typical illustration of how mediation determines action in The House of Mirth. Immediately after Mrs. Bart's death, Lily becomes the centre of a family council composed of her rich relatives, but, as we are told, "the question [of who is to be Lily's guardian] threatened to remain unsolved till Mrs. Peniston with a sigh announced: 'I'll try her for a year'" (36). The other relatives are relieved not to have to take on the responsibility, but they all agree that Lily could always act as a companion for an old woman who lives alone and who sometimes travels abroad. However, Edith Wharton's presentation of Mrs. Peniston's motives underscores the old lady's secret desire to impress her relatives with her magnanimity and her generosity:

> [A]s a matter of fact Mrs. Peniston had not been affected by [her relatives'] considerations. She had taken the girl simply because no one else would have her, and because she had the kind of moral mauvaise honte which makes the public display of

> selfishness difficult, though it does not interfere with its private indulgence. It would have been impossible for Mrs. Peniston to be heroic on a desert island, but with the eyes of her little world upon her she took a certain pleasure in her act. (36)

Mrs. Peniston's smug action, which evidently does not spring from genuine familial concern, is clearly intended to convey her moral superiority to her selfish relatives, to let them perceive her heroic and sacrificial nature. But the passage also outlines the striking discrepancy between Mrs. Peniston's public gesture and her private feelings because what she seeks to pass off as a virtuous deed lacks the required element of sincerity; in other words, there is no congruence between what she avows and what she actually feels. Mrs. Peniston's decision to assume Lily's guardianship is, therefore, merely a form of social posturing, a theatrical gesture, brought about by 'the eyes of her little world.' In short, it is an expression of her self- centeredness.

In her relationship with her niece, Mrs. Peniston turns her 'generosity' toward Lily into a calculated investment designed to ensure not the girl's security and independence but her servitude. As Edith Wharton points out, "Mrs. Peniston liked the periodical recurrence of gratitude evoked by unexpected cheques, and was perhaps shrewd enough to perceive that such a method of giving kept alive in her niece a salutary sense of dependence" (38). Mrs. Peniston's shrewdness is at odds with her apparent liberality. Indeed, some of Lily's troubles later in the story arise precisely because her aunt has distorted the meaning of the term 'kindness.'

When Lily finds out that "[t]o attempt to bring her [aunt] into active relation with life was like tugging at a piece of furniture which has been screwed to the floor" (38), we are left with the impression that Mrs. Peniston's interest in Society has ceased, or that her involvement has lost some of its youthful vitality. However, the truth is that Mrs. Peniston still considers the affairs of Society very compelling; we are told, for example, that

> She had always been a looker-on at life, and her mind resembled one of those little mirrors which her Dutch ancestors were accustomed to affix to their upper windows, so that from the depths of an impenetrable domesticity they might see what was happening in the street. (37)

The vicarious nature of Mrs. Peniston's relation to the ups and downs of fashionable Fifth Avenue reflects an idle, a futile, and a parasitical existence, nourished by the buzzing items of gossip and sustained by a taste for the sensational in the lives of other people. Endowed with a mind of "panoramic sweep" (121), Mrs. Peniston, from the secluded watch-tower of her upper-window, continues to keep up with what goes on around her:

> Mrs. Peniston followed the rise and culmination of the season as keenly as the most active sharer in its gaieties; and, as a looker-on, she enjoyed opportunities of comparison and generalization such as those who take part must proverbially forego. No one could have kept a more accurate record of social fluctuations, or have put a more unerring finger on the distinguishing features of each season: its dulness, its extravagance, its lack of balls or excess of divorces. (120)

In short, Mrs. Peniston is a busybody, who can boast of an unequalled intimacy with the secret chronicles of her society. Because this familiarity suggests that Mrs. Peniston perceives herself as a model of respectability, it also accounts for her dread of scenes and for her cold determination to maintain a spotless reputation before her small world.[3] When, toward the end of the first half of the novel, Mrs.

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[3] Later, Mrs. Peniston indignantly admonishes Lily for not having lived up to her model conduct: "'When I think of the example you've had in this house!'" (172)

Peniston decides to disinherit and forsake Lily, her action, once again, results from her fear for her own respectability. The action also recalls a similar instance in Stephen Crane's Maggie in which Mrs. Johnson refuses to help her daughter for fear of tarnishing the Johnsons' 'good' name. In both examples, the concern for social approval overrides family obligations, distorts the natural relations of life, and allows vanity to triumph over compassion. Book I, chapter eleven clearly suggests that Mrs. Peniston's considerations are purely social. She is shocked not by Lily's gambling debts or her rumoured flirtatious associations with Gus Trenor and George Dorset but by the fact that people are gossiping about Mrs. Peniston's niece. The aunt believes that Lily must indeed be to blame, for "It was horrible of a young girl to let herself be talked about" (127). The censorious judgment is directed not at Lily's actions but at her lack of discretion. Edith Wharton's strong sense of values underlines Mrs. Peniston's hypocrisy and indicates that personal dignity and virtue itself are closely related to, if not dependent upon, one's social reputation.

Other members of Lily's family are also victims of human mediation and are, therefore, constantly preoccupied with their public image. When Lily Bart was nineteen, she suggested to her mother that they might afford a few fresh flowers for the luncheon-table. "Mrs. Bart stared," Edith Wharton tells us. "Her own fastidiousness had its eyes fixed on the world, and she did not care how the luncheon-table looked when there was no one present at it but the family. But she smiled at her daughter's innocence. 'Lilies-of-the-valley,' she said calmly, 'cost two dollars a dozen at this season'" (31). In Mrs. Bart, we perceive a character's willingness to reverse the natural priorities of life: for

Lily's mother, the world, that is to say Society, seems to matter more than does her family. In her inexperience, Lily does not yet understand that, for Mrs. Bart, 'ornamenting' the table does not constitute an artistic gesture, but a social one, intended to impress one's friends. Social prominence at any cost leads Mrs. Bart into sacrificing her family and into further public posturing. We are told that just before the episode of the flowers, "[Lily] and her mother had been seated at the luncheon-table, over the chaufroix and cold salmon of the previous night's dinner: it was one of Mrs. Bart's few economies to consume in private the expensive remnants of her hospitality" (31). Such a scene indicates that The House of Mirth is more than a mere conventional criticism of materialism; the novel shows conclusively that the desire to impress one's mediators is closely related to and is often the root of ostentation, extravagance, and waste.

Mrs. Bart's concern with the world also distorts her perception of her husband's function in life. We are told that when Mr. Bart is dying, "To his wife he no longer counted: he had become extinct when he ceased to fulfil his purpose, and she sat at his side with the provisional air of the traveller who waits for a belated train to start" (33). As she saw and required it, Mr. Bart's role, it seems, was to provide his wife with sufficient means to enable her to continue dazzling her friends with her spending powers. The yearning for social prestige has re-directed Mrs. Bart's feelings toward the world so much that she experiences only a sense of irritation and a great deal of impatience at his slow death.

Naturally, Mrs. Bart turns bitter and resentful when the social success of others serves especially to highlight her own failure. With

Mr. Bart dead and with little money left, Mrs. Bart does not consider life worth living: "What was the use of living if one had to live like a pig? She sank into a kind of furious apathy, a state of inert anger against fate" (33). Unable to resist the pull of her mimetic behaviour, Mrs. Bart chooses to substitute fate for human mediation as the cause of her misfortune. Her next step is to avoid her former mediators:

> Mrs. Bart held herself fiercely aloof from the frugal tea-tables of her companions.... She was especially careful to avoid her old friends and the scenes of her former successes. To be poor seemed to her such a confession of failure that it amounted to disgrace; and she detected a note of condescension in the friendliest advances. (34)

The intensely proud Mrs. Bart can no longer conceal the extent of her preoccupation with her public image, and the fierce aloofness reflects her strong sense of shame, just as her heightened sensitivity indicates how much her perception of herself is coloured by what she feels her old friends think of her.

In utter desperation, Mrs. Bart resorts to her last weapon--she is willing to sacrifice Lily for the sake of Society:

> Only one thought consoled her, and that was the contemplation of Lily's beauty. She studied it with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance. It was the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt. She watched it jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian. (34)

The nouns 'passion,' 'weapon,' 'vengeance' and the adverb 'jealously' suggest Mrs. Bart's strong involvement in her struggle for what she deems her rightful place in New York society. Lily's beauty is itself reduced to a concrete thing to be used in the interest of her mother's crude ambitions. It is the only use Mrs. Bart can imagine for her daughter's beauty. As we shall see later, part of Lily's charm and her superiority to almost every other character in the story, particularly to her social friends, lies precisely in her ability to imagine higher and nobler uses for her beauty.

When Lily's 'best' friend, Judy Trenor, whose husband will play a decisive role in the social victimization of Lily, is introduced in Book I, chapter four, we are told that

> It was difficult to define her beyond saying that she seemed to exist only as a hostess, not so much from any exaggerated instinct of hospitality as because she could not sustain life except in a crowd.... [She] knew no more personal emotion than that of hatred for the woman who presumed to give bigger dinners or have more amusing house-parties than herself. (40)

For Judy Trenor, who starts the numerous social activities in the story with her Bellomont party, the possibilities of life have been reduced to a single public function, just as the range of her emotions has concentrated all its energy in the single feeling of hatred for her social rivals. In short, Mrs. Trenor exists exclusively for Society. Edith Wharton's definition indicates that Judy Trenor has distorted the suggestions of kindness and generosity traditionally associated with the terms 'hostess' and 'hospitality,' since her extravagant dinners and her amusing, that is to say licentious, parties are clearly intended to impress her friends and intimidate her rivals.

Mrs. Trenor's specific rival is another extremely wealthy society hostess, Maria Van Osburgh. The competition between the two women is all the more intense because it is never publicly acknowledged. In Book I, chapter four, Mrs. Trenor is seriously worried lest her Bellomont party not prove a success because, as she complains to Lily, her social secretary is absent:

> 'It was simply inhuman of Pragg to go off now.... She says her sister is going to have a baby--as if that were anything to having a house-party!... I asked a lot of people for next week, and I've mislaid the list and can't remember who is coming. And this week is going to be a horrid failure too--and Gwen Van

> Osburgh will go back and tell her mother how bored people were.' (41)

The artificiality of Mrs. Trenor's existence is nicely captured in her complete reversal of life's natural priorities: a successful house-party seems far more important, because socially more gratifying, than having a baby. That she does not genuinely care about her numerous guests is clear; but although her real aim is to avoid being accused of giving boring parties, Judy Trenor's very speech, punctuated by so many 'ands,' reflects that her existence is indeed dull and monotonous.

Judy's fears and suspicions are, however, not unfounded because Maria Van Osburgh has managed to have Gwen, her daughter, invited to the party, presumably to watch and report any signs of failure in the party. Judy Trenor's desire to emulate or even triumph over Maria Van Osburgh can be understood when we learn that in the social stratification depicted in the novel, the Van Osburghs represent the richest and the 'best' family in fashionable New York. Perhaps the clearest example of Judy's imitative conduct is her fight with Maria over a certain Lady Cressida Raith, the Duchess of Beltshire's sister. Lady Cressida had come over from England with letters of introduction to the Van Osburghs, but Mrs. Trenor, hoping to capture for herself all the prestige that accrues from being the first person to display a member of the English aristocracy to her highly class-conscious circle, manages to cheat her rivals of their prize. As she reveals to Lily in Book I, chapter four,

> 'Lady Skiddaw sent her over with letters to the Van Osburghs, and I heard that Maria Van Osburgh was asking a big party to meet her this week, so I thought it would be fun to get her away....Maria was furious, and actually had the impudence to make Gwen invite herself here, so that they shouldn't be quite out of it.' (41-42)

Judy's action of stealing the show is a deliberate attempt to spoil her rival's social success; more importantly, however, it is an indication of Judy's selfishness and frivolity--what she herself passes off as 'fun.' The whole passage is indeed a reflection on the petty tricks and strategies that the members of Society in The House of Mirth resort to for the sake of social prestige. Such a view of experience is self-validating: Judy Trenor seems too short-sighted to realize the irony in her accusing Maria of impudence. We should also note in passing that in spite of, or perhaps because of, her high social status, Maria Van Osburgh, as her anger clearly reveals, is herself intensely caught up in the prevailing desire for social glory, for what Judy loosely refers to as 'it.'

Judy Trenor is, however, disappointed in her catch because Lady Cressida turns out to be the 'wrong' kind of notability for that time of the year. When fashionable society requires pleasure and amusement, producing Lady Cressida, a clergyman's wife, for one's friends can only make one's party boring, as Judy has learned: "'I thought any friend of the Skiddaws' was sure to be amusing... I naturally supposed that she was the same sort... and it turns out that Lady Cressida is the moral [kind]... Think of my taking so much trouble about a clergyman's wife'" (42). In her precipitate attempt both to enhance her social image and to outwit her rival, Judy Trenor finds herself socially embarrassed by her new acquaintance because, in Judy's hedonistic world, morals and amusement cannot be reconciled. Judy's is also a world of means in which the characters look at each other in the light of how they can use people, manipulate them, or exploit them in the interest of social prestige. Because the Trenors "'have to have the bishop once a year,'" Judy Trenor points out to Lily, "'[Lady Cressida] would have given just the right tone to things... She would have been so useful at the right time'" (42). Other people become convenient ornaments in Mrs. Trenor's existence, just as religion itself provides a mere opportunity for more social posturing.

Judy Trenor's irreverent attitude toward religion reflects how Society has become an idol for her and her set. Just as piety, virtue, sincerity, and generosity are conspicuously lacking, so religion is a matter of form to which the characters pay lip service. In Book I, chapter five, Edith Wharton informs us that

> The observance of Sunday at Bellomont was chiefly marked by the punctual appearance of the smart omnibus destined to convey the household to the little church at the gates. Whether any one got into the omnibus or not was a matter of secondary importance, since by standing there it not only bore witness to the orthodox intentions of the family, but made Mrs. Trenor feel, when she finally heard it drive away, that she had somehow vicariously made use of it. (51)

The extent of Mrs. Trenor's hypocrisy and self-delusion is staggering. The ritualized and formal movements of the omnibus are designed to fool the world by attesting to the Trenors' religious devotion. In reality, Judy finds the Sunday service an irritating chore. Perhaps the size of the church is itself a reflection of the widespread neglect of the religious observances among the Trenors and their lot. After the uproarious Bellomont party, the people who do go to church, like the Wetheralls, do so merely as a mimetic gesture. Edith Wharton's disdain for these people's mockery is evident in what she tells us about them:

> The Wetheralls always went to church. They belonged to the vast group of human automata who go through life without neglecting to perform a single one of the gestures executed by the surrounding puppets. It is true that the Bellomont puppets did not go to church; but others equally important did--and Mr. and Mrs. Wetherall's circle was so large that God was included in their visiting-list. (52)

For the unthinking Wetheralls, who have debased the idea of religion, church-going has become no more than a social opportunity, a chance to be in the proximity of rich and conspicuous people.

But since Judy Trenor's bold social maneuver has failed to achieve its desired effect, Judy is seriously alarmed lest her reputation suffer the consequences, for, as she confides in Lily, "'it's no joke... if [Lady Cressida] stays here all the autumn she'll spoil everything, and Maria Van Osburgh will simply exult'" (43). The fear of being laughed at by Maria explains why Judy Trenor finds Lady Cressida such an unwelcome guest.

The desire to surpass all competitors for social recognition draws Judy into a vigilant and anxious attention to the achievements of others. While she is envious of the prestige Maria Van Osburgh seems to enjoy, Mrs. Trenor is also jealous and suspicious of the story's social climbers. Her insecurity suggests that fashionable Society is in fact a metaphysical quality, an abstract essence, generated by human mediation. To understand Judy's snobbish attitude toward the Welly Brys--a very rich family, feverishly eager to get into Society--is to comprehend the dynamics of mimetic behaviour governing social interaction in the story. Under the well-paid auspices of Carry Fisher, a Society scout, the Brys organize a party in which they provide tableaux vivants and expensive music, "and society, surprised in a dull moment, succumbed to the temptation of Mrs. Bry's hospitality" (131). To proclaim her superiority to the Brys, however, Judy Trenor declines to attend, and her husband, who does attend, finds the party disappointing and believes the Brys are mere social interlopers: "'no, no cigar for me. You can't tell what you're smoking in one of these new houses--likely as not the chef buys the cigars... my wife was dead right to stay away: she says life's too short to spend it in breaking in new people'" (138). The Trenors portray Society as an exclusive and a privileged circle into which the new-comers are not welcome, but though they keep up some pretense to social superiority, the Trenors have actually little right to it, and their grumbling and anger are in fact indicative of their uneasiness and fear lest the newly-rich dispossess them of their social privilege. As Edith Wharton's detailed analysis in Book I, chapter thirteen shows, mimetic rivalry is ultimately the cause of Mrs. Trenor's apparent indifference to the Brys' party:

> Mrs. Trenor had absented herself from the feast, perhaps for the reason so frankly enunciated by her husband, perhaps because, as Mrs. Fisher somewhat differently put it, she 'couldn't bear new people when she hadn't discovered them herself.' At any rate, though she remained haughtily at Bellomont, Lily suspected in her a devouring eagerness to hear of what she had missed, and to learn exactly in what measure Mrs. Wellington Bry had surpassed all previous competitors for social recognition. (140)

Mrs. Trenor's haughtiness is surely at odds with the keen curiosity she feels about finding out the degree of Louisa Bry's success, and the 'devouring eagerness' evidently reflects the intensity of her jealousy for that woman who would presume to give bigger dinners and more amusing parties than she. As one character confides to Lawrence Selden, "'The dimensions of the Brys' ball-room must rankle: you may be sure [Judy Trenor] knows 'em as well as if she'd been there last night with a yard-measure'" (160). Obviously then, far from being a dispassionate act proclaiming her independence and superiority to the Brys, Judy Trenor's absence from their party is in effect a form of presence at it.

That Mrs. Trenor's behaviour should be profoundly mediated through both Maria Van Osburgh's 'aristocratic' way of life and the dimensions of Louisa Bry's ball-room attests to a world in which money has gradually erased the differences between the various social segments and in which we therefore witness the triumph of internal mediation. "When the concrete differences among men disappear or recede into the background, in any sector whatever of society," as Rene Girard points out, "abstract rivalry makes its appearance."[3] Such a phenomenon is perhaps what Richard Poirier has in mind when, writing on The House of Mirth, he observes that, though the various social elements in the story struggle for power, "their essential qualities blend so easily into one another that there is in this novel actually no dramatized conflict of class or of social values."[4] The absence of these conflicts indicates that metaphysical desire for social eminence, and not the need for any concrete advantages, is what ultimately dissolves the differences between a Maria Van Osburgh, a Judy Trenor, and a Louisa Bry. It is also the source of the prevailing ambience of fear, jealousy, and rivalry.

Indeed, in telling Lily Bart in Book II, chapter six about Louisa Bry, Carry Fisher, a brilliantly portrayed figure who specializes in introducing the newly-rich into Society, makes a significant pronouncement that applies to most of the novel's characters:

> 'Talk of love making people jealous and suspicious--it's nothing to social ambition! Louisa used to lie awake at night wondering whether the women who called on us called on me because I was with her, or on her because she was with me; and she was always laying traps to find out what I thought. Of course I had to disown my oldest friends, rather than let her suspect she owed me the chance of making a single acquaintance--when, all the while, that was what she had me there for, and what she wrote me a handsome cheque for when the season was over!' (250-51)

In the story's atmosphere of deceit and hypocrisy, Carry Fisher's directness, in spite of her openly materialistic approach to experience, is particularly humorous and engaging. In a few words, she is able to describe the frantic effects of intense mediation generated by Louisa's social aspirations. The contrast Carry draws between love and social ambition is significant in that it reminds us of Judy Trenor's distinction between giving parties and childbearing: Louisa Bry and Judy Trenor feel that personal fulfilment can be achieved, not in one's family, but in the society at large. The point can, therefore, be made that what most of the inhabitants of the house of mirth seek is not a qualitative but a quantitative* enjoyment of life, an indiscriminate and insatiable thirst for pleasure and for the gratifying sensations of social prestige.

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[3] Girard 220.

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[4] Poirier 219.

Even Percy Gryce, a young man of considerable wealth but of severely limited imagination, runs away from Lily, whom he was hoping to marry, when his reputation seems at stake. Percy's excessive preoccupation with his public image makes him shallow and reflects the restricted range of his ambitions. For Edith Wharton, Percy's limitation lies in his inability to attain an intellectual or a moral distinction compatible with his considerable means, and in his distortion of the traditional meaning of such terms as 'glory,' 'honour,' and 'pride.' Her portrayal in Book I, chapter two of Percy's fascination with his Americana is an indictment of a mediocre people whose achievements have never extended beyond the trivial and the useless:

> Mr. Gryce's interest in Americana had not originated with himself: it was impossible to think of him as evolving any taste of his own. An uncle had left him a collection already noted among bibliophiles; the existence of the collection was the only fact that had ever shed glory on the name of Gryce, and the nephew took as much pride in his inheritance as though it had been his own work. Indeed, he gradually came to regard it as such, and to feel a sense of personal complacency when he chanced on any reference to the Gryce Americana. Anxious as he

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*In this respect, we might recall that Judy Trenor is jealous only of the 'dimensions' of the Brys' ballroom.

> was to avoid personal notice, he took, in the printed mention of his name, a pleasure so exquisite and excessive that it seemed a compensation for his shrinking from publicity.
>
> To enjoy the sensation as often as possible, he subscribed to all the reviews dealing with book-collecting in general, and American history in particular, and as allusions to his library abounded in the pages of these journals, which formed his only reading, he came to regard himself as figuring prominently in the public eye, and to enjoy the thought of the interest which would be excited if the persons he met in the street, or sat among in travelling, were suddenly to be told that he was the possessor of the Gryce Americana. (21)

Percy Gryce is a dismal, vain, and obtuse millionaire for whom Edith Wharton can barely disguise her contempt.[*] His perception and his thinking are so narrow that he is made to appear a lower form of organism, a sub-human creature unaware of the possibilities of life. In his utter self-delusion, Percy regards himself as a prominent figure in New York society; the unique and overwhelming pleasure he derives from the references to his name or to Americana attest to an existence wholly and anxiously dependent on public recognition, to an existence both insipid and artificial. His Americana, like Mrs. Trenor's big dinner parties or Mrs. Peniston's 'respectability,' matters only in so much as it excites the interest and admiration of other people.

Lily, a victim of her acquired taste for luxury, contemplates, if only for a moment, the inviting temptation of taking the eminently eligible Percy Gryce as a husband. Therefore, on their way to Judy Trenor's party, she indulges Percy's enormous vanity by pretending to be interested in his collection:

> Most timidities have such secret compensations, and Miss Bart

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[*] Edith Wharton's scornful impatience with Mrs. Peniston's dreary and trivial existence is equally strong. We are told that "She belonged to the class of old New Yorkers who have always lived well, dressed expensively, and done little else" (37). On the same page, we also learn that Mrs. Peniston "was a woman who remembered dates with intensity, and who could tell at a moment's notice whether the drawing-room curtains had been renewed before or after Mr. Peniston's last illness."

> was discerning enough to know that the inner vanity is generally in proportion to the outer self-deprecation. With a confident person she would not have dared to dwell so long on one topic, or to show such exaggerated interest in it; but she had rightly guessed that Mr. Gryce's egoism was a thirsty soil, requiring constant nurture from without. (21)

The metaphor works well to suggest both Percy's acute lack of an inward self and his helpless reliance on the outside world for his emotional survival.

Lily Bart's careful campaign to entice Percy Gryce indicates the degree to which she too has assimilated the values and the ways of her vulgar and acquisitive world. We watch as she resorts to what she describes as her 'delicate' methods in attempting to secure for herself the attentions of a wealthy bachelor. Though she has no admiration for Percy, because his shortcomings are evident--she rightfully reflects that what he lacks is not opportunity but imagination--she seems ready to marry him; in other words, she is acting in accordance with the rules of Mrs. Bart's world, one in which beauty is cheapened and turned into an instrument of social interaction, into a means of influencing the actions of other people.

In an excellent article entitled "The House of Mirth Revisited," Diana Trilling points out that "The poignancy of [Lily Bart's] fate lies in her doomed struggle to subdue that part of her own nature which is no better than her own culture."[7] In other words, Lily attempts to transcend what, particularly in Book I, has always bound her to her social set: her crass ambitions, her social snobbery, and her willingness to engage in the prevailing rivalries--in short, all that pertains to social prestige. If her decision in the second half of the novel to opt out of the mimetic rivalry with Bertha Dorset represents a social defeat, it also stands for Lily's spiritual victory.

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[7] Diana Trilling, "The House of Mirth Revisited," in Edith Wharton: Twentieth Century Views, ed. Irving Howe (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1962): 109.

However, toward the beginning of the novel, when Lily feels she has secured Percy Gryce for a husband, Edith Wharton reveals the extent and the exact nature of Lily's crude aspirations:

> Her vulgar cares were at an end. She would be able to arrange her life as she pleased, to soar into that empyrean of security where creditors cannot penetrate. She would have smarter gowns than Judy Trenor, and far, far more jewels than Bertha Dorset... Instead of having to flatter, she would be flattered; instead of being grateful, she would receive thanks. There were old scores she could pay off.... And she had no doubts as to the extent of her power. (49)

Lily's speculations about her great expectations suggest how her unimaginative use of wealth is confined to the social realm, for her desires centre on the purchase of gowns and jewels, just as her models of behaviour are none other than two of the most irresponsible and selfish characters in the story; in fact, Irving Howe calls Bertha Dorset "a ferocious bitch."[6] Lily's vulgarity can also be discerned in the quantitative appreciation of her projected life (with its "far, far more jewels") and, ironically enough, in her limited understanding of the word 'vulgar.' We should also note that Lily envisages settling old scores and triumphing, in her ability to flaunt her wealth, over the two leading women of her circle. In short, Lily perceives society as an end in itself, not as an opportunity for nobler and higher possibilities of life. In a real sense, Lily contemplates using Percy's money "stupidly" (70), to quote her very word.

Besides her eagerness to flaunt her material wealth, Lily is particularly anxious to display her physical beauty, her 'asset' or

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[6] Irving Howe, "A Reading of The House of Mirth," in Edith Wharton: Twentieth Century Views, 123.

'property,' as Mrs. Bart calls it. Such a readiness on Lily's part suggests that she thinks of herself as special, but the need to exhibit her beauty in public indicates her strong dependence on the outside world for the terms of her 'superiority.' Edith Wharton tells us that on the evening Lily attends the opera in Book I, chapter ten,

> To Lily, always inspirited by the prospect of showing her beauty in public, and conscious tonight of all the added enhancements of dress, the insistency of Trenor's gaze merged itself in the general stream of admiring looks of which she felt herself the centre. Ah, it was good to be young, to be radiant, to glow with the sense of slenderness, strength and elasticity, of well-poised lines and happy tints, to feel oneself lifted to a height apart by that incommunicable grace which is the bodily counterpart of genius! (116)

Lily Bart's vanity blinds her to the real intentions behind Gus Trenor's charged and pushy gaze: Gus, who has no poetic enjoyment of the moment, is simply contemplating the time Lily will repay him, in sexual favours, for the money he has lent her. Lily's perception is also hampered by her failure to transcend the social meanings of the terms 'good' and 'grace,' and by her inclination to elevate her 'bodily grace' to the realm of genius.

Just as Percy Gryce dedicates his millions to drawing people's attention to himself, Lily relies on her physical appearance to achieve a similar end for herself. The novel makes a subtle connection between the characters' tendency to use money on the one hand and beauty on the other in the interest of social recognition and of the need to legitimize their pretentions to superiority. When it is Lily Bart's turn to display herself as Reynolds' Mrs. Lloyd, during the Welly Brys' party in Book I, chapter twelve, the narrative voice makes it clear that Lily feels her beauty to be a real asset:

> Lily had not an instant's doubt as to the meening of the murmur greeting her appearance. No other tableau had been

> received with that precise note of approval: it had obviously been called forth by herself, and not by the picture she impersonated.... [T]he completeness of her triumph gave her an intoxicating sense of recovered power. Not caring to diminish the impression she had produced, she held herself aloof from the audience till the movement of dispersal before supper, and thus had a second opportunity of showing herself to advantage, as the throng poured slowly into the empty drawing-room where she was standing.
>
> She was soon the centre of a group which increased and renewed itself as the circulation became general, and the individual comments on her success were a delightful prolongation of the collective applause. At such moments she lost something of her natural fastidiousness, and cared less for the quality of the admiration received than for its quantity. Differences of personality were merged in a warm atmosphere of praise, in which her beauty expanded like a flower in sunlight. (136)

Diana Trilling observes that "The House of Mirth is always and passionately a money story. It is money that rules where God, love, charity or even force of character or distinction of personality might once have ruled."[9] The claim is only partly true, however, for it neglects the importance of physical beauty in the eyes of the novel's central figure. When carefully considered, The House of Mirth is concerned with a character's desire for social prestige--with money and beauty being only two different opportunities for gratifying that ambition. To say that the novel is 'always and passionately' about money is also to overlook the significance of Lily's appearance as a *tableau vivant*--a significance which increases our understanding of her character and which has a strong effect on Lawrence Selden, the novel's second major figure. But of Selden more later.

In its description of the artistic display at the Brys' party, the narrative voice draws subtle parallels between Lily Bart and some of her rich friends. Lily's complacent willingness to prolong the flattering sensation of public approval reminds us of Percy Gryce's decision to subscribe to every single review dealing with book-collecting so as to enjoy, as often as possible, the gratifying feeling of seeing his name in print, while Lily's 'intoxicating sense of recovered power' recalls how the Welly Brys "felt intoxicated by their first [social] success" (188). Lily also shares the other characters' uncritical, even enthusiastic, acceptance of public recognition.

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[9] Trilling 111.

Although, as Diana Trilling correctly notes, Lily's ambitions are those of art,"[19] one has to introduce an important qualification in the light of Lily's calculated behaviour in the preceding scene: Lily herself manipulates what is essentially an artistic moment so as to enjoy maximum social triumph. In other words, Lily cheapens her artistic appearance by turning it into an opportunity to impress the audience, and, like others of her circle, she is thereby involved in the process of redefining terms and debasing ideas.

One of the novel's subtly achieved implications is that membership in the house of mirth either restricts, dulls, or distorts the perception of its inhabitants. Lily's materialistic vision makes her not only complacent but also short-sighted; she thus begins to transfigure the objects of her desire and to perceive the "crowded selfish world of pleasure" in a favourable light. In Book I, chapter five, for instance, she feels that

> Her companions seemed full of amiable qualities. She liked their elegance; their lightness, their lack of emphasis: even the self-assurance which at times was so like obtuseness now seemed the natural sign of social ascendency. They were lords of the only world she cared for, and they were ready to admit her to their ranks and let her lord it with them. Already she felt within her a stealing allegiance to their standards, an acceptance of their limitations, a disbelief in the things they did not believe in, a contemptuous pity for the people who were not able to live as they lived. (50)

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[19] Trilling 110.

Lily's passive assimilation of her group's values and beliefs is perhaps best captured in the loose sentence with which the quotation concludes--a sentence in which the main clause is followed by three parallel constructions reflecting Lily's relatively relaxed attitude and the extent of her surrender of her freedom to her mediators of desire. As Edith Wharton indicates, Lily willingly and knowingly espouses her group's standards: like a faithful disciple, she shows a strong readiness to alter her convictions to suit her lords' smug perception of themselves and their unfair and arrogant expectations of other people.

Lily's distorted vision, engendered by the desire for social 'ascendency,' leads her into the paths of snobbery and prejudice on the one hand and social rivalry on the other. In a conversation with Selden in Book I, chapter one, Lily enviously remarks on how "delicious" it would be to have a flat, like Selden's, all to oneself; when Selden replies that he does know a woman who lives in one, Lily interrupts him:

> 'Oh, I know--you mean Gerty Farish.' She smiled a little unkindly. 'But I said marriageable--and besides, she has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap....'
> 'You shouldn't dine with her on wash-days,' said Selden. (7)

Lily's snobbish tone shows how her culture is speaking through her; in fact, Lily sounds very much like Mrs. Trenor, for whom, one might note, the adjective 'horrid' is a favourite word. Lily has thus already acquired the appropriate note of disdain she assumes when speaking about those she considers her social inferiors. Her remarks about Gerty also indicate that beauty and wealth constitute Lily's guiding criteria of worth, just as her unkind and fastidious sentiments about the terms of Gerty's life reflect a preoccupation with social status and are clearly not calculated to endear her to us.

Later on in Book I, chapter eight, Edith Wharton elaborates on Lily's attitude toward Gerty Farish:

> Lily's own view of her wavered between pity for her limitations and impatience at her cheerful acceptance of them. To Miss Bart, as to her mother, acquiescence in dinginess was evidence of stupidity; and there were moments when, in the consciousness of her own power to look and to be so exactly what the occasion required, she almost felt that other girls were plain and inferior from choice. (88-89)

Although the passage suggests Lily's admirable alertness to the possibilities of life, her capacity for hope--one that clearly anticipates Gatsby's "romantic readiness" and his "extraordinary gift for hope"--it also points out Lily's naive, fastidious, ungenerous, and exacting expectations of someone like Gerty.

The other unattractive characteristic Lily shares with the members of her circle is her readiness to engage in the prevailing rivalries for social prestige; indeed, a major part of the novel's plot is taken up by an intense power struggle between Lily Bart and Bertha Dorset, a thoroughly unpleasant figure. Our first and telling glimpse of Bertha Dorset takes place in the second chapter of the novel as she is trying to find a seat on the train to Bellomont and happens to see Lily:

> 'Oh, Lily--are you going to Bellomont? Then you can't let me have your seat, I suppose? But I must have a seat in this carriage--porter, you must find me a seat at once. Can't someone be put somewhere else? I want to be with my friends.' (23)

Bertha's character is thus revealed in a few words: utterly self-engrossed and irresponsible, Bertha, with her self-assertive tone and gestures, is all will. She, therefore, expects or demands the instant gratification of her desires, and, as this incident portends, has no scruples about sacrificing other people to please or protect herself.

Surprising though it may seem, Lily perceives her as a model of behaviour, and in Book I, chapter three, we find Lily hoping she possessed Bertha Dorset's power with men, for, as Edith Wharton indicates, "the mere thought of that other woman, who could take up a man and toss him aside as she willed, without having to regard him as a possible factor in her plans, filled Lily Bart with envy" (25). Lily's desire is aimed at Bertha's negative and unrefined form of power, at her ruthless and bull-like strength to behave as her instinct leads her. In other words, Bertha's methods help sharpen Lily's perception of what is necessary in the pursuit of pleasure and in power struggles.[11]

The principal reason Lily ends up 'losing' Percy Gryce has to do more with the consequences of mimetic rivalry than with "her impulsively expressed wishes to be with Selden,"[12] as Richard Poirier claims. The events of Book I, chapter five amply suggest that Lily breaks her promise to Percy to accompany him to church because she wants to demonstrate her own power over Selden to Bertha, the rival. There is nothing impulsive about the gesture: it is a deliberate response to the rumours that Selden and Bertha's affair is not over yet. Edith Wharton's explanations underline Lily's vanity and her entrapment in the grip of imitative desire:

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[11] Other characters find Bertha's ways enviable. After comparing Bertha to Lily, Mrs. Trenor has, as she tells Lily in Book I, chapter four, no doubt whom she admires:

> 'Every one knows you're a thousand times handsomer and cleverer than Bertha; but then you're not nasty. And for always getting what she wants in the long run, commend me to a nasty woman.' (44)

Judy's choice in the contrast she establishes between beauty and cleverness on the one hand and nastiness on the other reveals once again how the scale of values in the New York upper class is turned upside down.

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[12] Poirier 221.

> Miss Bart had really meant to go to church. She had even risen earlier than usual in the execution of her purpose....Her intentions had never been more definite; but...today the whole current of her mood was carrying her toward Lawrence Selden. Why had he come? Was it to see herself or Bertha Dorset?...Lily had not rested till she learned from Mrs. Trenor that Selden had come of his own accord. (53)

I am in no way suggesting that Lily's marriage to Percy Gryce would have been a better thing for her to devote her time to; I am only showing that Bertha Dorset's presence on the scene has brought about Lily's 'impulse' toward Selden, at the same time as it has revitalized the triangular relationship between the three characters. Judy Trenor's careless hint that the affair between Selden and Bertha is perhaps still alive encourages Lily to adopt strategies designed to proclaim her superiority to her rival:

> 'He didn't even wire me--he just happened to find the trap at the station. Perhaps it's not over with Bertha after all,' Mrs. Trenor musingly concluded, and went away to arrange her dinner cards accordingly.
>
> Perhaps it was not, Lily reflected; but it should be soon, unless she had lost her cunning. If Selden had come at Mrs. Dorset's call, it was at her own that he would stay. (53)

By emphasizing the casualness of Mrs. Trenor's remark, the narrative voice directs our attention to something that will pique Lily's pride and draw her into Bertha's world of scheming and cunning.

The day after Selden's arrival at Bellomont, Lily gets up, confident in her unbounded power to charm and self-convinced that Selden had come down to the Trenors' to see her. She is, therefore, surprised to find him and Bertha sitting and talking quietly in the Bellomont library,[13] because, as Edith Wharton points out,

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[13] If the people in the house of mirth do not go to church, neither do they put the library to its original use: "The library at Bellomont was in fact never used for reading," we are told, "though it had a certain popularity as a smoking-room or a quiet retreat for flirtation" (59).

> The truth is that she was conscious of a somewhat keen shock of disappointment. All her plans for the day had been built on the assumption that it was to see her that Selden had come to Bellomont. She had expected, when she came downstairs, to find him on the watch for her; and she had found him, instead, in a situation which might well denote that he had been on the watch for another lady. Was it possible, after all, that he had come for Bertha Dorset?...It did not occur to her that Selden might have been actuated merely by the desire to spend a Sunday out of town.... But Lily was not easily disconcerted; competition put her on her mettle, and she reflected that Selden's coming, if it did not declare him to be still in Mrs. Dorset's toils, showed him to be so completely free from them that he was not afraid of her proximity. (60-61)

The passage clearly illustrates the power of mimetic desire to muddle and narrow a character's understanding: Lily's assumptions and expectations derive, as the narrative voice makes clear, from her determination to challenge what she presumes to be Bertha Dorset's influence over Selden.

But although competition tends to strengthen and sharpen her courage, Lily can and will never descend to the lowest sphere of mimetic rivalry; unlike Bertha, she can never be brutally unscrupulous or callous, even in her dealings with her rival. Diana Trilling is right when she remarks that "what Mrs. Wharton is captured by in Lily Bart is her ambiguity of purpose, the conflict between her good sense and the pull of spirit."[14] Lily's practical 'good sense,' as determined and controlled by the laws governing social interaction in the novel, grounds her in the pervasive and stifling atmosphere of trivial ambitions, vain display, and fruitless rivalries, while her 'pull of spirit,' as defined and enriched by Lawrence Selden's enlightened criticism and by Lily's lingering sense of tradition, enables her to transcend the negative forms of mediated desire in which she finds herself caught, especially in the first half of the story. In short, what makes Lily Bart an appealing heroine is her ultimate ability not to regard society as an end. For example, though she can at times think of her attractiveness as a form of social exchange, Lily can also entertain higher and nobler, if initially somewhat idealistic and sentimental, thoughts about the significance of her beauty. As we learn in Book I, chapter three,

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[14] Trilling 109.

> Her ambitions were not as crude as Mrs. Bart's.... She liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she could make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste... she liked to picture herself as... sacrificing her pleasure to the claims of an immemorial tradition. (34-35)

In this instance Lily perceives her beauty not as a means of attracting public applause but as an aid to the improvement of human culture; she feels her obligations not only to her community but also to a distant past that makes her aware of the sense of continuity in human existence. In other words, Lily's desire is for the general good, not merely for her personal happiness.

Such an image of Lily's is what Selden catches a glimpse of in the episode of the tableaux vivants and in which, as we perceive,

> Lily had purposely chosen a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings.... [T]he noble buoyancy of her attitude, its suggestion of soaring grace revealed the touch of poetry in her beauty that Selden always felt in her presence.... Its expression was now so vivid that for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part. (134-35)

In its natural state, free from the social trappings and the mimetic entanglements of Lily's familiar surroundings, her true character emerges as a happy combination of spirit, art, and beauty, and, also, as part of an even higher and transcendent realm of being. Selden's gift for superior appreciation is once again rewarded in Book II, chapter three, as he contrasts her to other women of her circle and feels that

> It was one of the days when she was so handsome that to be handsome was enough, and all the rest--her grace, her quickness, her social felicities--seemed the overflow of her bounteous nature. But what struck him was the way in which she detached herself, by a hundred undefinable shades, from the persons who most abounded in her style ...her grace cheapening the other women's smartness as her finely-discriminated silences made their chatter dull. (215-16)

Lily's refined taste, the loveliness of her personality, and the generosity of her feelings expose the other women's vulgarity and insipidity. It is clear that Edith Wharton is suggesting a positive standard to which the reader might appeal for an alternative to the society depicted in her book. Ultimately this standard is reflected in Lily's 'bounteous nature,' in her goodness and in her ability to overcome her social need for revenge.

Before examining this significant decision in the heroine's life, I would like to look at how a minor figure in the story, Gerty Farish, from whom Lily feels so different--because, as Lily points out, "'she likes being good, and I like being happy'" (7)--enacts in her own way and in her own little world what the central character undertakes on a larger scale. Lily's articulated distinction between Gerty and herself points to what the novel posits as two important alternatives in the characters' lives: the desire for the good and the desire for happiness; while the first is built on a life of virtue, generosity, and especially an awareness of the continuity and solidarity of human existence, the second presupposes a life of luxury and pleasure and a strong concern with the individual. On the basis of both Lily's own admission and many textual examples, one can fairly claim that Gerty Farish, in spite of her scanty means, is a model of compassion and generosity, and seems in every respect motivated by the desire for the good.

As if to test Gerty's charitable nature, Edith Wharton unexpectedly thrusts her in a quiet but passionate triangular relationship in which she discovers herself competing against Lily for Selden's love. The morning after the Welly Brys' entertainment to which Selden had taken his cousin, Gerty begins to see herself as "the centre of a little illumination of her own" (149), but, although she feels that her cousin's attentions have been too marked to be mistaken, she soon finds herself face to face with the bitter and disappointing truth that Selden had been calling on her because of her goodness to Lily. In Book I, chapter fourteen, we witness Gerty's silent suffering as her suddenly flaming jealousy jolts her out of her contented existence, pulls her deeper and deeper into the love triangle, and profoundly alters her perception of her good friend Lily and of Selden:

> He had kissed her before--but not with another woman on his lips. If he had spared that she could have drowned quietly... She had been so contented, life had seemed so simple and sufficient--why had he come to trouble her with new hopes? And Lily--Lily, her best friend! Perhaps had it not been for Lily, her fond imagining might have become truth....And now she was thrust out [of Selden's heart], and the door barred against her by Lily's hand!...She cried quietly as she undressed... But on her bed sleep could not come, and she lay face to face with the fact that she hated Lily Bart. It closed with her in the darkness like some formless evil to be blindly grappled with. Reason, judgment, renunciation, all the sane daylight forces, were beaten back in the sharp struggle for self-preservation. She wanted happiness--wanted it as fiercely and as unscrupulously as Lily did, but without Lily's power of obtaining it. And in her conscious impotence she lay shivering, and hated her friend--(161-63)

Immediately after detailing Gerty's poignant feelings of humiliation, bitterness, and defeat, Edith Wharton introduces Lily, knocking on Gerty's door, late at night, unaware of Gerty's mental misery, but herself exhausted and humiliated, having just narrowly escaped Gus

Trenor's insistent sexual advances. After unlocking the door, Gerty, Edith Wharton explains,

> heard her name in a cry, had a glimpse of her friend's face, and felt herself caught and clung to....Gerty's compassionate instincts, responding to the swift call of habit, swept aside all her reluctances. Lily was simply one who needed help.... disciplined sympathy checked the wonder on Gerty's lips, and made her draw her friend silently into the sitting-room... Gerty had unconsciously adopted the soothing note of her trade: all personal feeling was merged in the sense of ministry... (163)

Compassion, a quality unthinkable among most of the other characters of the story, has become second nature in Gerty, whose brief moral lapse prevents any inclination to perceive her as a sentimentalized figure. Lily's clinging fingers, Gerty's trained compassion, her instinctive sympathy, and habit itself all suggest the concepts of kinship and tradition, both of which characterize her desire for the good and explain why Gerty's personal feelings of hatred and resentment are not allowed to override her charitable nature. Her vocation swiftly reasserts itself as she renounces the pursuit of further mimetic rivalry.

In her triangular relationship with Selden and Bertha Dorset, Lily manages to transcend her struggle against the other woman in a Gerty-like manner but under different circumstances and with far more serious consequences. Because Bertha is extremely aware of her circle's excessive attention to its social reputation, she undertakes a systematic campaign of malicious gossip, resorting to "every turn of the allusive jargon which," as Lily well knows, "could flay its victims without the shedding of blood" (110). In the psychological "struggle of consciousnesses in a universe of physical nonviolence,"[18] social ridicule has become the new weapon for destroying one's enemies.

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[18] Girard 110.

When concrete evidence in the form of Bertha Dorset's love-letters comes into Lily's hands, the heroine is placed face to face with her keenest moral crisis in the story, and, given the unspoken laws of self-preservation governing the characters' lives, Lily would feel and be completely justified if she chose to surrender to the soothing temptation to redress Bertha's inflicted social wrongs. In Book I, chapter nine, we are told that

> There is nothing society resents so much as having given its protection to those who have not known how to profit by it: it is for having betrayed its connivance that the body social punishes the offender who is found out. And in this case there was no doubt of the issue. The code of Lily's world decreed that a woman's husband should be the only judge of her conduct....But with a man of George Dorset's temper there could be no thought of condonation--the possessor of his wife's letters could overthrow with a touch the whole structure of her existence. And into what hands Bertha Dorset's letters had been delivered! For a moment the irony of the coincidence tinged Lily's disgust with a confused sense of triumph. But the disgust prevailed--all her instinctive resistances, of taste, of training, of blind inherited scruples, rose against the other feeling. Her strongest sense was one of personal contamination. (104)

Lily is saved from further mimetic rivalries by the restraining hand of tradition and by her enduring sense of honour, two values that combine to represent the only transcendence available in a society where generosity of feeling and moral restraint have tacitly become two incomprehensible follies of the remote and forgotten past. Lily's view of experience which thus reaches far back into time--her backward glance, so to speak--suggests a larger and nobler sense of human fellowship, in sharp contrast to the narrow and narcissistic outlook of a Bertha Dorset. Lily's moral imagination enables her to perceive the far-reaching consequences of a simple action that could destroy the entire fabric and 'overthrow' 'the whole structure' of a person's existence. The extent of Lily's shrinking from such an act is reflected in the strength of her feelings of 'disgust' and 'contamination.' The passage also attests to Lily's moral beauty and represents a scathing indictment of the novel's barbarians who, unlike Gerty and Lily, have completely severed their links with the past by actively undermining the continuity of life in the present, and who have cut themselves loose from what Edith Wharton calls "old habits, old restraints, the land of inherited order" (147). In their chaotic yearning and scramble for social prestige, the members of Lily's set, for whom the sanctity of tradition is unthinkable, have frivolously reduced all values--emotional, ethical, artistic--to questions of what Wemmick in Great Expectations calls 'portable property.'

In turning down her 'opportunity' to redress the wrongs done her by Bertha, Lily also turns her back on the society depicted in the novel--she transcends the view of the social order held by someone like Simon Rosedale, an important figure, who has consistently and insistently urged Lily to use those letters to blackmail Bertha Dorset into silence, and for whom the desire to enter what he perceives as the "inner paradise" (240), his obsession with social recognition, accounts for every one of his actions in the story, and also for all his accumulated wealth.

Rosedale is undoubtedly the novel's most conspicuous social-climber, who knows exactly what he wants and who is refreshingly candid about his determination to achieve it. He begins his social enterprise as an outsider to New York society, where he is stigmatized, repeatedly snubbed, and invariably ignored. In Book I, chapter two, Judy Trenor expresses her circle's typical view of Rosedale: "he was the same little Jew who had been served up and rejected at the social board a dozen times within her memory" (16); however, her and her world's obdurate opposition to Rosedale's social advances serves merely to inflame his ambitions, and, as Edith Wharton points out, "He knew he should have to go slowly... But he was prompt to perceive that the general dulness of the season afforded him an unusual opportunity to shine, and he set about with patient industry to form a background for his growing glory" (121).

Although he does like Lily for herself, he also considers her as a means of getting into her privileged circle; therefore, when, in Book I, chapter two, he tries to walk her to her train, his intentions, as we come to realize, are all too obvious, for

> To be seen walking down the platform at the crowded afternoon hour in the company of Miss Bart would have been money in his pocket, as he might have phrased it. He knew, of course, that there would be a large house-party at Bellomont, and the possibility of being taken for one of Mrs. Trenor's guests was doubtless included in his calculations. Mr. Rosedale was still at a stage in his social ascent when it was of importance to produce such impressions. (15-16)

The last sentence suggests that Rosedale is really an outsider to the society depicted in the novel; indeed, his conduct and motivation resemble those of some of the characters in Dreiser's Sister Carrie who seek to be in the proximity of the conspicuous and the fashionable or to figure in the society columns with noticeable names. Rosedale is convinced that his association with Lily Bart and her set will impart to him some of their prestige and endow him with some of their social glamour.

In an atmosphere of social antagonisms, sharp rebuffs, and long delays, Rosedale dedicates himself to a life of steady calculation, in which even his future wife could only be a social ornament. That the novel is concerned only indirectly with money can again be illustrated in the last chapter of Book I in which Rosedale is explaining to Lily the significance of his amassed fortune:

> 'I generally have got what I wanted in life, Miss Bart. I wanted money, and I've got more than I know how to invest; and now the money doesn't seem to be of any account unless I can spend it on the right woman. That's what I want to do with it: I want my wife to make all the other women feel small. I'd never grudge a dollar that was spent on that....What I want is a woman who'll hold her head higher the more diamonds I put on it.' (176-77)

The metaphysical desire for social conspicuousness determines Rosedale's perception of the 'right' woman: one whose superiority depends on the power of her husband's heaped and crude wealth--not on her cultivation, delicacy, or refined ~~taste~~,-as Selden thinks. It is, therefore, fair to claim that Rosedale desires Society, not a wife, as Lily herself puts it to Carry Fisher: "'Mr. Rosedale wants a wife who can establish him in the bosom of the Van Osburghs and the Trenors'" (239). Rosedale's eagerness to marry for Society also brings out his determination to settle old scores and the personal injuries suffered during his social ascent; he is unashamedly frank about his ambitions:

> 'Why should I mind saying that I want to get into society? A man ain't ashamed to say he wants to own a racing stable or a picture gallery. Well, a taste for society is just another kind of hobby. Perhaps I want to get even with some of the people who cold-shouldered me last year.' (256)

Though his candour tempers the narrowness and crudity of his view of Society, Rosedale concedes that mimetic rivalry is part of his motivation to achieve a social position. Rosedale's whole relationship with Lily Bart is significant for the light it throws on the ethical implications necessarily involved in the pursuit of social recognition. The novel stresses the point over and over that the intense desire to enter Society leads one into expedient, often unscrupulous, but inevitable strategies to triumph over one's opponents. When Lily declines his offer of marriage, which he had coupled with the condition that she use Bertha's love-letters as valuable social assets, Rosedale, in his view of revenge as a straightforward, extremely simple, even natural transaction, does not fully understand her scruples: "'If you'd only let me, I'd set you up over them [Bertha and her lot] all. I'd put you where you could wipe your feet on 'em!'" (300) Rosedale's old standards of value have evidently not kept pace with his successful efforts to accumulate wealth, and marriage to him would thoroughly entangle Lily in endless rivalries over social prestige.

By the end of the story, Rosedale, who has completed his ascendency, is no longer considered the "same little Jew," even by Judy Trenor's standards:

> His name began to figure on municipal committees and charitable boards;...his candidacy at one of the fashionable clubs was discussed with diminishing opposition. He had figured once or twice at the Trenor dinners, and had learned to speak with just the right note of disdain of the big Van Osburgh crushes. (240-41)

In his triumph, Rosedale becomes a snob, imitating what presumably appears to be the Trenors' affected speech to express his superiority to Judy's rivals.

If Lily Bart prefers not to become Rosedale's wife, her decision reflects a disenchantment with the social order depicted in the novel, a rejection of a world in which ethical considerations--themselves an extension of the tradition being eroded--are increasingly being lost sight of in the characters' obsession with their public image. In a real sense, Rosedale's conditional marriage offer constitutes a temptation designed to test Lily's moral nature. After having rejected his plan of "reconciliation" with Bertha Dorset, Lily, is described in Book II, chapter seven, reflecting on Rosedale's idea:

> Put by Rosedale in terms of business-like give-and- take, this understanding took on the harmless air of a mutual accommodation, like a transfer of property or a revision of boundary lines. It certainly simplified life to view it as a perpetual adjustment, a play of party politics, in which every concession had its recognized equivalent: Lily's tired mind was fascinated by this escape from fluctuating ethical estimates into a region of concrete weights and measures. (259)

Lily's understanding of the meaning of life reveals that her superiority to virtually every other character in the story is one of essence, for the distinction lies in her larger and more humane view of human existence. Unlike the rest of her set, Lily senses that life involves such qualities as sacrifice, generosity, forgiveness, and cannot be reduced to a merciless and cold business affair which never accepts loss and always seeks profit. In short, in her non- narcissistic view of experience, Lily is aware of the invisible but crucial bonds that sustain human 'relations.' Therefore, to be obsessed with social conspicuousness is to pervert the natural relations of life and to accept and resort to a business-like attitude toward one's wife, as in Rosedale's case, toward one's husband and daughter, as did Mrs. Bart, and toward society at large, as numerous examples from the story illustrate.

Richard Poirier does not do enough justice to the frequent and long periods of time Lily Bart spends in pondering the consequences of her conduct toward Bertha Dorset; talking about Lily's unwillingness to blackmail her rival, Poirier claims that "Lily's failure to carry out this blackmail is a matter less of ethics than ... of her responding to impulses."[14] Lily's frequent speculative interior monologues are surely at odds with Poirier's assertion, because in themselves they amount to a mini-philosophical debate between Lily's practical 'good sense' and her 'spirit' on the morality of revenge. In Book I, chapter eleven, after having turned away from Rosedale's alternative and after having burnt Bertha's letters, the 'valuable' and incriminating evidence against her rival, Lily knows that she has sealed her own social ruin when she rejects revenge as an acceptable and current form of exchange in human relations:

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[14] Poirier 221.

> She lay awake viewing her situation in the crude light which Rosedale's visit had shed on it. In fending off the offer he was so plainly ready to renew, had she not sacrificed to one of those abstract notions of honour that might be called the conventionalities of the moral life? What debt did she owe to a social order which had condemned and banished her without trial? She had never been heard in her own defence; she was innocent of the charge on which she had been found guilty; and the irregularity of her conviction might seem to justify the use of methods as irregular in recovering her lost rights. Bertha Dorset, to save herself, had not scrupled to ruin her by an open falsehood; why should she hesitate to make private use of the facts that chance had put in her way? After all, half the opprobium of such an act lies in the name attached to it. Call it blackmail and it becomes unthinkable; but explain that it injures no one, and that the rights regained by it were unjustly forfeited, and he must be a formalist indeed who can find no plea in its defence. (300)

Lily's reflections go to the heart of what actually ails New York society: in their careless and frantic pursuit of pleasure and their determined efforts to preserve or acquire an enviable social image, the characters, the novel makes clear, have subverted the restraints and dictates of the moral life, forgotten or abandoned the claims of honour, and reduced life to a question of 'concrete weights and measures.' Social supremacy rules where traditional notions of honour once prevailed: spiritual transcendence has given way to social considerations. Although it is correct to observe that "One of the subtler themes of The House of Mirth is the parallel Mrs. Wharton traces between Lily's defeat and the inevitable defeat of art in a crass materialistic culture,"[17] one can take the idea further and submit that Lily's social defeat reflects not only the defeat of art, but, more fundamentally, the subversion of the moral life.[18] Indeed, Trilling herself concedes that Edith Wharton's greatness lies in a "driving literary concern with moral truth."[19] Though it is also true that Lily's ambitions are those of art, as Trilling argues, one should point out the obvious moral considerations that ultimately sustain those ambitions. Such a rich and complete perspective enables Lily to free herself from the influence of debasing mimetic desire: this time she will not emulate Bertha Dorset's conduct. The conscious decision also underlines Lily's ability to apprehend the universality of values and signals her withdrawal from her society's habit of legitimizing and justifying its unethical practices through a constant redefining of the concepts and codes governing its characters' interactions. For Lily, blackmail remains blackmail no matter how one looked at it or how temptingly justifiable circumstances might sometimes make it seem. The nobility of Lily's resisting such an easy course lies in the fruitlessness of her action: nobody will ever know, let alone understand, why Lily chose to commit suicide. Only Lawrence Selden will--when Lily is already dead.

It is difficult not to read The House of Mirth, in the light of its last chapter, as an ironic comment on Selden's inability to determine once and for all Lily's true nature until after her death. If the other characters manipulate one another to gratify their social ambitions, Selden, it is fair to say, is continually experimenting with Lily to satisfy his intellectual and personal theories and guesses. The very first page of the novel catches him putting Lily's intentions to the test as he spots her waiting for her Bellomont train:

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[17] Trilling 109.

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[18] We are told, for instance, that the hold of conscience on Gus Trenor's life is so weak that he experiences now and again only "spasmodic bursts of virtue" (51).

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[19] Trilling 104.

> her desultory air perplexed him....[she had] an air of irresolution which, might, as he surmised, be the mask of a very definite purpose....
>
> An impulse of curiosity made him turn out of his direct line...and stroll past her. He knew that if she did not wish to be seen, she would contrive to elude him; and it amused him to think of putting her skill to the test. (3)

Selden's experiments are indicative of what may be called his bad faith, since they presuppose definite hypotheses, and, therefore, suggest that Lily has in a way already been judged before she is submitted to any test. Behind Selden's ungenerous shrewdness, we sense a fastidious, suspicious, and an excessively analytical mind, obsessed with 'figuring out' Lily's intentions. In fact, the point is made over and over that Selden's ways of knowing Lily proceed from his habit of putting her actions under a close scrutiny: "In judging Miss Bart, he had always made use of the 'argument from design'" (5), and "he could never be long with her without trying to find a reason for what she was doing" (11).

Yet at the same time, Selden's rigorous examination of Lily's conduct makes him her most consistent, discerning, and best critic, forcing Lily to question, re-evaluate, and often discard some of her crude ambitions. In this respect, he may be considered her most influential mediator, shaping and even altering the course of her behaviour. In Book I, chapter five, when her entire social set, including Percy Gryce, her present social 'opportunity,' is assembled around the Trenors' dinner-table, Lily has the chance to compare Percy and Selden:

> It was that comparison which was her undoing. Why else had she suddenly grown interested in Selden? She had known him for eight years or more: ever since her return to America he had formed a part of her background....Miss Bart was a keen reader of her heart, and she saw that her sudden preoccupation with Selden was due to the fact that his presence shed a new light on her surroundings. (54)

Lily's change of heart toward Percy Gryce, whose family has just recently settled in New York, is the result of, among other things, her sudden awareness of her slowly accumulated friendship with Selden who, as a representative of her past, helps Lily perceive the mediocrity and triviality in the lives of her present friends:

> Lily found herself scanning her little world through his retina...She looked down the long table, studying its occupants one by one, from Gus Trenor, with his heavy carnivorous head sunk between his shoulders, as he preyed on a jellied plover, to his wife, at the opposite end of the long bank of orchids, suggestive, with her glaring good-looks, of a jeweller's window lit by electricity. And between the two, what a long stretch of vacuity! How dreary and trivial these people were! Lily reviewed them with a scornful impatience:... young Silverton...who now lived on his friends and had become critical of truffles; Alice Wetherall... whose most fervid convictions turned on the wording of invitations and the engraving of dinner cards... (55)

Lily's heavily mediated classification of her friends presents an unsavoury picture of a group lacking in delicacy, taste, and refinement, and oblivious to the higher and imaginative possibilities of existence. Their meagre achievements, which are essentially society-oriented, testify to the death of the intellect and the spirit in their lives.

In contrast, Lawrence Selden's superiority is evident because, as Lily thinks,

> he had preserved a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at.... most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom. It was Selden's distinction that he had never forgotten the way out. That was the secret of his way of readjusting her vision. (54-55)

In other words, Selden's distinction lies, as Lily believes, in his ability both to transcend the power of money, the magnetic attractions of society, and to resist the prescriptions of the social codes. His outside points of reference work to offset and annul the power of the stifling and imprisoning barriers of the 'great gilt cage'; these 'points of contact' are ultimately located in what Selden himself calls his "republic of the spirit" (68), a seemingly attractive alternative to the society depicted in the novel, for it corresponds to the realm of the intellect and "cultivation" (63). In the "republic of the spirit," Selden feels himself free, as he explains to Lily, "'from everything--from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents'" (68). After spending some time in society, he happily retreats his to safe haven, apparently unaffected by the trivialities of the outside world, for he has retained what he calls his 'amphibious' ability. However, Selden's failure to help Lily, to be her true friend, and to save her when she appeals to him, reflects an obvious flaw in his perception and a serious limitation of his republic.

Lily is certainly justified in her reproach of Selden: "'Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead?'" (72) Since his mere presence or his words always have the effect of cheapening her social aspirations, of throwing her whole world out of focus, Selden, one would imagine, should be more than just critical, should be suggesting a viable alternative to what he disapproves of. Irving Howe notes that in Edith Wharton's fiction "Men fail the heroines less from bad faith than from weak imagination, a laziness of spirit."[10] In Selden's circumstances, the laziness of spirit signals a lack of courage, a failure to trust his informed and independently derived perception of Lily, for his understanding of her is usually right when he relies on his own judgment, when he resists the insidious influence of the prevailing social standards. For example, at the Brys' party, when Selden has caught a glimpse of Lily's true character,

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[10] Howe 15.

> In the long moment before the curtain fell, he had time to feel the whole tragedy of her life. It was as though her beauty, thus detached from all that cheapened and vulgarized it, had held out suppliant hands from the world in which he and she had once met for a moment, and where he felt an overwhelming longing to be with her again. (135)

In a very real sense, Selden himself is being put to the test, when the detached and amused spectator is suddenly called upon to help, to rescue Lily from a world he condemns because it neither appreciates her beauty nor understands her goodness. Selden, however, fails his test, because his judgment is rooted in his critical faculty--a faculty that observes, speculates, but also doubts. It is precisely because he is possessed of a "doubting mind" (193) that Selden ultimately falls victim to the malicious gossip spread by the Calibans of Lily's world. His undoing occurs in Book I, chapter fourteen, while he is spending time in the element he disapproves of and Lily's wherabouts become the subject of discussion for a group assembled around Carry Fisher's dinner-table. Thinking that Judy Trenor was at home, Lily had left the party earlier to join her friend:

> 'The Trenors'?' exclaimed Mrs. Jack Stepney. 'Why, the house is closed--Judy telephoned me from Bellomont this evening.'
>
> 'Did she? That's queer. I'm sure I'm not mistaken. Well, come now, Trenor's there, anyhow--I--oh, well--the fact is, I've no head for numbers,' he broke off, admonished by the nudge of an adjoining foot, and the smile that circled the room.
>
> In its unpleasant light Selden had risen and was shaking hands with his hostess. The air of the place stifled him, and he wondered why he had stayed in it so long....remembering a phrase

> of Lily's: "It seems to me you spend a good deal of time in the element you disapprove of...."
>
> It was pitiable that he, who knew the mixed motives on which social judgments depend, should still feel himself so swayed by them. How could he lift Lily to a freer vision of life, if his own view of her was to be coloured by any mind in which he saw her reflected?
>
> The moral oppression had produced a physical craving for air, and he strode on, opening his lungs to the reverberating coldness of the night. (158-59)

So shrewd an observer and so discerning a critic, who "knew the mixed motives" (emphasis added) underlying gossip, is nevertheless unfaithful to his knowledge when he lets his view of Lily be mediated by the group's self-righteous insinuations. His difficulty in breathing gives the lie to his earlier claim to Lily that, though he spends a great deal of time in Society, his "lungs can [still] work in another air" (70). To be 'swayed' by the malicious items of gossip is to betray a lack of a strong inward self, and to endorse, even if only grudgingly, the standards that censure Lily. It is also to reveal a keen concern for one's social reputation, to fear the kind of judgment conveyed by the group's smug and knowing smile--in short, it is to side with the vulgar world of the Farishes and the Stepneys against Lily Bart.

Selden lets Lily down a second time when New York society removes itself to Europe. When Bertha Dorset angrily turns against Lily and refuses to allow her to board the Dorsets' yacht, Lily, who feels publicly humiliated and who wants to be saved from the embarrassment of the moment, asks Selden to take her for a walk. When they find a bench,

> Selden sat down beside her, waiting for her to speak... [himself] kept from free utterance by the wretched doubt which had slowly renewed itself within him.... [His] reason obstinately harped on the proverbial relation between smoke and fire. The memory of Mrs. Fisher's hints... while [it] deepened his pity also increased his constraint, since, whichever way he sought a free outlet for sympathy, it was blocked by the fear of committing a blunder. (219)

Selden's 'wretched doubt' indicates his inability not merely to brush off the past insinuations about Lily but to transcend the force of gossip through his faith in her. The novel is thus making a subtle connection between Society's reduction of ethical considerations to a matter of 'concrete weights and measures' and Selden's entrapment in the realm of evidence, his failure to believe in Lily's goodness and innocence without the need of certain and solid proof.[21] Such a failure can also be discerned in Selden's adherence to the safe and reductive generalizations of a proverb. Richard Poirier describes Selden's inadequacy well when he notes that

> Selden's ways of 'knowing' people are essentially cosmopolitan --by the guesswork, the gossip, the categorizing assumptions that substitute for the slowly accumulated intimacy on which Mrs. Wharton places such redeeming value.[22]

The 'slowly accumulated intimacy,' presented as a surer basis for knowledge and a viable condition in human relations, is another way of describing faith and trust.

When assaulted by the vulgar hints of Mrs. Fisher and her like, Selden's 'republic of the spirit' proves itself no fortress: denying Lily his sympathy attests to a stinginess of generous feelings, for which his justification remains purely social. Selden's eventual desertion of Lily, more conspicuous than her desertion by her stodgier and less discerning friends, reveals that society is finally as triumphant over him as over Lily.

To understand the seriousness of Selden's conscious decision to forsake Lily so as to safeguard his reputation, we should now examine the happy story of George and Nettie, two minor characters who live outside the boundaries of the society portrayed in the novel. Nettie Struther first became involved with a stylish gentleman, but was left ill and abandoned by him until she was rescued by Gerty Farish. However, as Nettie explains to Lily, the real change in her life began when George asked her to be his wife:

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[21] Indeed, Selden is unable to heed his own advice to Gerty Farish concerning Lily: "'She has it in her to become whatever she is believed to be--you'll help her by believing the best of her'" (156).

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[22] Poirier 232-33.

> 'When I got back home, George came round and asked me to marry him. At first I thought I couldn't, because we'd been brought up together, and I knew he knew about me. But after a while I began to see that that made it easier.... If George cared for me enough to have me as I was, I didn't see why I shouldn't begin over again--and I did.' (315)

George's faith, combining sympathy and understanding, and growing from his shared past with Nettie, makes the latter's renewal possible by bringing new hope to her life, and attests to the superiority of trust and belief over the other characters' contractual perception of human relationships. By drawing on George's unconditional trust, Nettie has found enough strength to gather up the fragments of her life.

The effect of the visit on Lily is profound: after leaving Nettie's home, she realizes that, through George's faith and Nettie's courage, the couple has thus reached "the central truth of existence" (319). This truth has to do, once again, with the sense of solidarity and relatedness in human affairs and demonstrates the need for generosity of spirit as a way of counteracting the disintegrating influences and the alienating social forces that pervade the house of mirth, invade even Selden's 'republic,' and entrap and compromise the human spirit.

Unlike Nettie and George, "All the men and women [Lily] knew were like atoms whirling away from each other in some wild centrifugal dance" (319). The simile suggests that meaning can be achieved only through a strong sense of fellowship, while a departure from the centre--from the traditional positive supports of home, family, and religion--draws individuals into a life of constant drifting and endless solitude. The parallel with Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby is obvious enough.

The theme of Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth is a variation on one of the most persistent themes in the American novel: the loss of a tradition. Through all her social wanderings, Lily is actually involved in a restless search for a home and therefore for an identity to give her life meaning. Just before her death, Lily realizes, in one of the most important and compelling passages in the novel, that there is something more miserable than material poverty:

> it was the clutch of solitude at her heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years...--the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spindrift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them. And as she looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life. Her parents too had been rootless, blown hither and thither on every wind of fashion, without any personal existence to shelter them from its shifting gusts. She herself had grown up without any one spot of earth being dearer to her than another: there was no centre of early pieties, of grave endearing traditions, to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others. In whatever form a slowly-accumulated past lives in the blood--whether in the concrete image of the old house stored with visual memories, or in the conception of the house not built with hands, but made up of inherited passions and loyalties--it has the same power of broadening and deepening the individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving. (319)

Lily feels that material poverty is nothing in comparison with emotional poverty and spiritual houselessness because a person's existence can acquire meaning and a sense of permanence only in so far as it is part of the larger human family and when it is strongly anchored in and sustained by the positive traditions of the past. Lily also realizes that identity cannot exist in a vacuum, that hope for the future is inevitably based on the memories, emotions, and experiences of the past, and that fashionable society, though it might give one temporary eminence, does not include a spiritual home as one of its advantages. Generosity of spirit is possible only through an awareness of one's roots and one's place in the human chain of being between past and future generations. In short, Lily comes to think of tradition as an effective force against the intensely narcissistic view of experience held by most of the characters in the house of mirth, a view rooted in a deliberate or careless distortion of the traditional. We notice this distortion in the characters' redefining of terms such as 'glory,' 'honour,' and 'grace,' to legitimize their social ambitions; in the Wetheralls' and the Trenors' flippant attitude to religion; in Mrs. Trenor's, Mrs. Bart's, and Mrs. Bry's use of 'hospitality' as mere self-serving social opportunity; in Mrs. Peniston's hard, shrewd, and mechanical view of liberality; in Mrs. Peniston's and Mrs. Bart's strange understanding of kinship; in the fact that a library is merely a quiet place for flirtation; in the prevalent view that art is just another form of portable property; in the increasing importance of hotel life as a replacement for home[23]; in Selden's attempts at rationalizing faith; and finally in the widespread simplification of complex moral issues to mere business transactions. As I have tried to demonstrate, the keen desire to enter fashionable society or the need to maintain one's 'enviable' position in it accounts for these distortions and for the resulting neglect of the traditional.

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[23] The world of the fashionable New York hotel is represented by Norma Hatch and her friends,

> wan beings as richly upholstered as the furniture, beings without definite pursuits or permanent relations, who drifted on a languid tide of curiosity from restaurant to concert-hall, from palm-garden to music-room.... Somewhere behind them, in the background of their lives, there was doubtless a real past, peopled by real human activities. (274)

IV. Isabel Archer's Search for the Aristocratic Situation

Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady is a novel about destiny. The story presents the different stages through which James's heroine, Isabel Archer of Albany, moves to become the Mrs. Gilbert Osmond of Rome. At the climax--more precisely in the famous chapter forty-two--Isabel comes to realize what has happened in her life. As James puts it,

> The idea of the whole thing is that the poor girl, who has dreamed of freedom and nobleness, who had done, as she believes, a generous, natural, clear-sighted thing, finds herself in reality ground in the very mill of the conventional.[1]

Most critical opinion about The Portrait tends to show that the transition in Isabel's life is accomplished in part by her natural disposition and in part by the influence of the numerous characters surrounding her. But while the exact nature of this influence can be easily traced to the machinations of a Madame Merle, Isabel's natural disposition, that is to say her character, has elicited a great deal of analysis. L. C. Knights, for instance, finds "wilfulness as well as vulnerability in the attitudes [Isabel] brings to bear on experience."[2] Tony Tanner observes that "her theories and imagined versions of reality are generated behind closed doors and closed windows."[3] Juliet McMaster perceives an element of perversity in Isabel: "On the one hand, like a true American, she is ardently engaged in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; but on the other she is morbidly attracted by their opposites, and devotes herself to death, and immobility, and suffering."[4] Leon Edel detects egotism in Isabel--but one "which is limited and damaging to the self" (unlike Osmond's which is cruel and destructive of other people).[5]

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[1] The Notebooks of Henry James, eds. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York: Oxford UP, 1947) 15.

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[2] L. C. Knights, "Henry James and Human Liberty," The Sewanee Review 83.1 (1975): 12.

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[3] Tony Tanner, "The Fearful Self," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Portrait of a Lady, ed. Peter Buitenhuis (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1968): 76.

Because it is obvious that Isabel Archer's character has been amply analyzed, I want merely to stress that from the outset her approach to life is indeed very romantic, idealistic, and theoretical. But since the essence of the romantic is desire, I suggest that in order to increase our understanding of the central event of The Portrait, in which the heroine is swept off her feet by the sophisticated Gilbert Osmond, we see Isabel Archer as a victim of what Rene Girard calls 'mimetic desire.' Human mediation is ultimately responsible for Isabel's choice of Osmond: the latter's favourable presentation by Madame Merle makes him seem desirable to Isabel's imagination.

Before encountering one of her major mediators in Mrs. Touchett, Isabel, we are told, had "had no regular education and no permanent home."[6] The lack of strong family support and of a sustaining tradition leaves the young girl highly impressionable, for Isabel, it seems, has had no positive models to look up to. As a result, "Her thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the judgment of people speaking with authority" (55). This suggests that Isabel had too much freedom too early in her life, as her impulses, feelings, and opinions were not subjected to adult guidance. In a real sense, Isabel's ability to judge correctly and wisely may already have been affected because she has been allowed to grow up too much the child of her own nature. In her case, it is appropriate to speak of the failure of her parents. "In matters of opinion," James states, "she had had her way, and it had led her into a thousand ridiculous zigzags" (53). This deprivation largely accounts for Isabel's theoretical approach to experience.

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[4] Juliet McMaster, "The Portrait of Isabel Archer," American Literature 45 (1973-74): 51.

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[5] Leon Edel, "Two Kinds of Egotism," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Portrait of a Lady, ed. Peter Buitenhuis (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1968): 111.

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[6] Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, ed. Leon Edel (Boston: Houghton, 1963) 40. Future references are from this edition.

It also accounts for the quality of Isabel's mind. James's comments in chapter three suggest how Isabel seems to have had all the makings of an impulsive and a spoilt child:

> The little girl had been offered the opportunity of laying a foundation of knowledge in [a primary school in the neighbourhood]; but having spent a single day in it, she had protested against its laws and had been allowed to stay at home....the foundation of her knowledge was really laid in the idleness of her grandmother's house... (32)

James is here explaining the limitations of an uneducated mind that lacks both training and profundity.[7] As Leon Edel puts it, "Isabel has been badly educated. She has no sense of history; no authoritative voices have given her the essential values or structure of civilization."[8] But Isabel seems unaware of this weakness; in fact, she believes that she has "a finer mind than most of the persons among whom her lot was cast" (52). She also thinks that "her mind moved more quickly than theirs, and this encouraged an impatience that might easily be confounded with superiority" (53).

Since James makes this point about Isabel's youth clear, F. R. Leavis's criticism of what he calls James's "evasiveness" does not do justice to the novelist's complex portrayal of Isabel:

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[7] A page later, James describes Isabel's mind as "a great deal of a vagabond."

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[8] Leon Eden, "The Myth of America in The Portrait of a Lady," The Henry James Review 7.2-3 (1986): 13.

> We can't even say that James makes an implicit critical comment on the background of American idealism that fostered [Isabel's] confidence in life and in her ability to choose: he admires her so much, and demands for her such admiration and homage, that he can't be credited with 'placing' the conditions that, as an admirable American girl, she represents. James's lack of specificity favours an evasiveness, and the evasiveness, if at all closely questioned, yields inconsistency of a kind that partly empties the theme of The Portrait of a Lady of moral substance.[9]

There surely is nothing evasive about James's presentation of Isabel's background in Albany: Isabel lacked what James clearly suggests is the proper restraint in childhood. In fact, her case is typical of other American girls; when Isabel arrives in Gardencourt, James explains,

> She formed a fast friendship with her uncle.... Isabel amused him more than she suspected--the effect she produced on people was often different from what she supposed--and he frequently gave himself the pleasure of making her chatter. It was by this term that he qualified her conversation, which had much of the 'point' observable in that of the young ladies of her country, to whom the ear of the world is more directly presented than to their sisters in other lands. (56)

Mr. Touchett's genial amusement springs from his realization of Isabel's innocent but mistaken perception of herself, which makes her believe that her rapid and trivial talk is serious conversation. More importantly, however, the passage stresses that Isabel, far from being uncommon, is actually representative of the American girl, whose distinct Americanness lies in her being urged to be independent and to have a voice of her own.

James points out that the attitude Isabel brings with her to Europe has its roots in the kind of upbringing she had in Albany:

> Like the mass of American girls Isabel had been encouraged to express herself; her remarks had been attended to; she had been expected to have emotions and opinions. Many of her opinions had doubtless but a slender value, many of her emotions passed away

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[9] F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948) 132.

> in the utterance; but they had left a trace in giving her the habit of seeming at least to feel and think, and in imparting moreover to her words when she was really moved that prompt vividness which so many people had regarded as a sign of superiority. (56-57)

In a very real sense, Isabel is the product of a human environment that encouraged originality, that stressed appearance over essence, and that gave Isabel an exaggerated sense of her significance. James is thus tracing the roots of what fostered Isabel's confidence in life and her eventual determination to be the author of her own destiny to the great American democratic abstractions and ultimately to the idealistic and romantic attitudes toward experience to be found particularly in Emerson's and Thoreau's writings--a point to be taken up later in the chapter.

There is also a sense in which the natural process of growing up has in Isabel's case been accelerated; one gets the impression that Isabel has not gone through the traditional stages of childhood. This lack, as we shall see later, leaves Isabel vulnerable to the various influences of the different characters with whom she comes into contact.

Writing about Isabel's significance in the overall structure of the novel, Richard Poirier observes that,

> Being at the centre of the action, Isabel is surrounded, so to speak, by the various people whose attitudes she has at one time adopted, momentarily bringing one or another to the centre with her, but only to send him back to the periphery, there to represent through the rest of the novel a fixity of attitude from which she herself has escaped.[18]

Although Poirier concedes that Isabel adopts, that is to say imitates, the attitudes of the other characters, he also suggests that her changes reflect an informed step she takes of her own free will. But Isabel's

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[18] Richard Poirier, The Comic Sense of Henry James: A Study of the Early Novels (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960) 216.

'escape' is in fact the result of mediation, as one model of behaviour replaces another in Isabel's experience in America and, more particularly, in Europe.

The process of mediation begins while Isabel is still in Albany. Henrietta Stackpole is introduced as Isabel's first significant model of conduct. James tells us in chapter six that Isabel "had a friend whose acquaintance she had made shortly before her father's death, who offered so high an example of useful activity that Isabel always thought of her as a model" (54). Besides Henrietta's usefulness, Isabel admires her friend's courage and energy; but, in Isabel's eyes, Henrietta matters most as "a proof that a woman might suffice to herself and be happy" (55). However, in James's conception of his heroine's development, Henrietta's mediation is inadequate: for a person who candidly declares, "'I'm quite content to be myself; I don't want to change'" (107), cannot really satisfy Isabel's large schemes of life.

Consequently, Henrietta is quickly eclipsed when Isabel's aunt, the Europeanized Mrs. Touchett, arrives in Albany. The first perceptible change in Isabel is linguistic:

> Mrs. Touchett was as eccentric as Isabel had always supposed; and hitherto, whenever the girl had heard people described as eccentric, she had thought of them as offensive and alarming. The term had always suggested to her something grotesque and even sinister. But her aunt made it a matter of high but easy irony, or comedy, and led her to ask herself if the common tone, which was all she had known, had ever been as interesting. (36)

With Mrs. Touchett's advent, Isabel's consciousness expands to make room for a new appreciation of the term 'eccentric,' as Isabel is, in a sense, introduced to the sphere of the unusual and the uncommon. In an extremely well-structured novel, James is already laying the ground for Isabel's choice of the unconventional. To Isabel, her expanded definition of 'eccentric' reveals the commonness and the narrowness of her previous understanding.

But Mrs. Touchett's effect on her niece is not merely linguistic; the young girl is chiefly struck by her aunt's manner:

> No one certainly had on any occasion so held her as this foreign-looking woman, who retrieved an insignificant appearance by a distinguished manner and, sitting there in well-worn water-proof, talked with striking familiarity of the courts of Europe. (36)

Mrs. Touchett's distinction seems to derive from her apparent association with the courts of Europe, and, in Isabel's naive perception, the aunt has every reason to feel superior and to behave accordingly, since she has lived with the 'great.' The narrative voice, however, helps us see through Mrs. Touchett's insistent superiority:

> There was nothing flighty about Mrs. Touchett, but she recognized no social superiors, and, judging the great ones of the earth in a way that spoke of this, enjoyed the consciousness of making an impression on a candid and susceptible mind. (36)

Since, to a vulnerable mind like Isabel's, judging presumably places the judge above those judged, Mrs. Touchett appears at least equal, if not superior, to European royalty. But, as James makes clear, Mrs. Touchett's right to superiority is actually more arrogated than earned; in fact, she herself knows it: that is why she needs the admiration of an innocent mind like Isabel's. In other words, the aunt's enjoyment of her claim to superiority is mediated through her niece's recognition of it.

Judging others is in itself a step toward what Isabel will later come to consider "the essence of the aristocratic situation": being in "a better position for appreciating people than they are for appreciating you" (164). However, such an apparently high and refined realm, with its aesthetic suggestions, belongs only to Madame Merle and

Gilbert Osmond.

As yet, Isabel is still held by her aunt's unrestrained judgments and outspokenness. Indeed, Mrs. Touchett's marked pronouncements during her stay in Albany alter Isabel's perception considerably. For instance, the aunt's direct criticism of the Albany house gives rise to a new desire in the niece, who suddenly becomes aware of the limitations and provinciality of her surroundings. Mrs. Touchett or "this unexpected critic" (35), as she is called, "finds everything [in the house] immensely worn" (34); she also inspects the front parlour "without enthusiasm" (35). Finally, she delivers her ultimate judgment on the entire house: "'In Florence we should call it a very bad house'" (35). The niece's cold and resigned response shows the process of mediation at work: "Isabel felt some emotion, for she had always thought highly of her grandmother's house ....'I should very much like to go to Florence'" (36). By criticizing the Albany house, Mrs. Touchett is suggesting the superiority of Florence and its palaces, and making Europe seem desirable in her niece's eyes. Indeed, Isabel's reflections in chapter four attest to the impact of Mrs. Touchett's visit:

> The importance of what had happened was out of proportion to its appearance; there had really been a change in [Isabel's] life. What it would bring with it was as yet extremely indefinite.... She had a desire to leave the past behind her and, as she said to herself, to begin afresh....with her sense that the note of change had been struck, came gradually a host of images of the things she was leaving behind her. (39)

In a sense, Isabel's experience is similar to that of the "Young Man from the Provinces,"[11] and her decision to leave for Europe recalls the hero's legendary departure for the city to seek his fortune. According to Lionel Trilling, the "Young Man from the Provinces" usually learns about life from books; Isabel's response to Europe is also mediated through romantic notions derived from literature. For instance, after a brief inspection of Gardencourt, the Touchetts' estate in England, Isabel is in raptures: "'I've never seen anything so lovely as this place. I've been all over the house; it's too enchanting'" (26), she exclaims to Ralph. When her cousin introduces Lord Warburton, his English friend, Isabel's reaction reveals a mind filled with romantic expectations: "'Oh, I hoped there would be a lord; it's just like a novel!'" (27). To talk about Isabel's theoretical approach to Europe is, therefore, to recognize the hold of the written word on her imagination and to perceive the importance of mimetic desire in her life. In fact, her understanding of an entire culture has its roots in the suggestions obtained from her readings:

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[11] Lionel Trilling, "The Princess Casamassima," The Liberal Imagination (New York: Viking P, 1950): 61.

> She questioned [her uncle] immensely about England, about the British constitution, the English character, the state of politics, the manners and customs of the royal family, the peculiarities of the aristocracy, the way of living and thinking of his neighbours; and in begging to be enlightened on these points she usually enquired whether they corresponded with the descriptions in the books. (57)

When Isabel visits Lockleigh, Lord Warburton's house, the place "affected the young visitor as a castle in a legend" (75). Isabel also thinks that the English are not "very nice to girls," because, as she says, "'they're not nice to them in the novels'" (58). Her coloured perception, the result of her mediated knowledge, points to her inexperience and to her tendency to read her surroundings inaccurately. Furthermore, Isabel's famous eagerness, indeed her insistence, to see the ghost of Gardencourt suggests how the roots of romance can in fact be traced to mimetic conduct:

> 'Please tell me,' she asks her cousin, 'isn't there a ghost?'
> 'A ghost?'

> 'A castle-spectre, a thing that appears. We call them ghosts in America....You ought to [see them] in this romantic old house.'
>
> 'It's not a romantic old house,' said Ralph. 'You'll be disappointed if you count on that....there's no romance here but what you may have brought with you.' (50)

Isabel's romantic notions about Europe, Ralph suggests, indicate the way in which she is already predisposed to a major error of perception.

Henrietta's Stackpole's direct observations about her friend are certainly helpful in revealing the flaws in Isabel's perception. In fact, Henrietta makes many of the novel's most pertinent comments about Isabel--comments often used by critics even as they belittle the speaker. "'The peril for you,'" she warns Isabel, "'is that you live too much in the world of your own dreams....You're too fastidious; you've too many graceful illusions'" (185). What Isabel's dreams and ambitions consist of we quickly learn as early as chapter six:

> She spent half her time in thinking of beauty and bravery and magnanimity; she had a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action. (53)

Tony Tanner rightly observes that Isabel "seems unprepared for any harsh encounter with all that indifferent otherness which is not the self, which is not amenable to the self."[12] At this stage, Isabel is too eager but also too inexperienced to perceive the shortcomings inherent in her view of life.

Right from her arrival in Gardencourt, Isabel lets everybody know that she is very attached to her independence, challenges any preconceived views others may have formed about her, and insists on defining herself on her own terms. When her cousin, Ralph, dares to suggest that his mother may have 'adopted' Isabel, the latter's reaction is immediate:

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[12] Tanner 69.

> 'Adopted me?' The girl stared, and her blush came back to her, together with a momentary look of pain which gave her interlocutor some alarm. He had underestimated the effects of his words....'Oh no; she has not adopted me. I'm not a candidate for adoption.' (29)

The speed with which Isabel fixes on a casually spoken word reveals a nature extremely sensitive to its freedom and adamantly opposed to any notions of dependence. The incident also points to her American background and its belief in originality and personal autonomy. Isabel's rejection of Ralph's attempt to place her underscores her conviction that social categorizing is inimical to her desire for a free exploration of life; as she explains to Ralph, "'I'm very fond of my liberty'" (30). For the major part of the story, Isabel continues to assert her autonomy by resorting to her most characteristic response to experience: rejection. By consistently turning down propositions and proposals made to her, she unknowingly makes herself seem significant and indeed desirable in the eyes of others--her worth increases, for instance, as she persists in declining offer after offer from Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton.

Isabel's unusual conduct arouses so much interest that the other characters are both puzzled by and curious about her intentions. In short, Isabel draws attention to herself simply by refusing to conform to people's expectations of her. Ralph Touchett is from the outset very curious about his cousin's fate:

> 'All this time,' he said [to his mother], 'you've not told me what you intend to do with her.'
>
> 'Do with her? You talk as if she were a yard of calico. I shall do absolutely nothing with her, and she herself will do everything she chooses. She gave me notice of that.' (48)

On the one hand, it is ungenerous of Ralph to deny his cousin her dignity by thinking of her as if she were an object, by trying to place her in a fixed social category; on the other hand, we realize that Isabel's determination to do as she chooses remains too idealistic to find fulfilment in society. In other words, Isabel's idealism, though noble and attractive, can never detach itself from the human world, can never transcend human mediation. Isabel will ultimately be defined in terms of the various human relationships in which she engages.

However, before her rude awakening in chapter forty-two, Isabel persists in thinking that her actions are all her own and that no human influences affect her choices. Ralph's musings on Isabel's destiny capture both James's and our curiosity about the heroine:

> She was intelligent and generous; it was a fine free nature; but what was she going to do with herself? This question was irregular, for with most women one had no occasion to ask it. Most women did with themselves nothing at all; they waited, in attitudes more or less gracefully passive, for a man to come that way and furnish them with a destiny. Isabel's originality was that she gave one an impression of having intentions of her own. (63)

Unlike 'most women,' Isabel intends to be the master of her fate and, as an expression of the country she comes from, she believes herself in a position to create herself and shape her future.

Isabel's first major action in Europe is to refuse Lord Warburton's marriage proposal. To make us understand the magnitude of Isabel's action in turning down the Englishman's offer, James describes him as having "a certain fortunate, brilliant exceptional look--the air of a happy temperament fertilised by a high civilization--which would have made almost any observer envy him at a venture" (19).[13] Besides showing James's awareness of metaphysical desire--a person's desire to be another person--the passage suggests that what Isabel is turning down is perhaps the epitome of human civilization, for Lord Warburton might be seen as the best 'thing' Europe could conceivably offer the American girl.

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[13] Ironically, Gilbert Osmond will keenly envy Lord Warburton's social position and fortune.

What initially attracts Lord Warburton to Isabel is her desire for independence. Already in the opening chapters of the novel, Lord Warburton's curiosity about her is piqued as she, even before her arrival in Gardencourt, is being discussed in terms of her independence. Lord Warburton gradually discovers, however, that Isabel's mind is her most engaging but formidable trait. Isabel's hold on him is immediate and strong, but when his offer is rejected, Lord Warburton can barely disguise his anger--a clear indication that his desire increases as it is frustrated: "'with you I never feel safe. I've a sort of sense that you're always summing people up.... I can't make out what you're up to....You strike me as having mysterious purposes--vast designs'" (76). When Isabel replies that she is not willing to settle down because she wants to improve her mind through foreign travel, Lord Warburton's reaction is immediate: "'You can't improve your mind, Miss Archer.... It's already a most formidable instrument. It looks down on us all; it despises us'" (76). Lord Warburton's abrupt words indicate how Isabel's action has unleashed the strain of bitterness in him. More significantly, however, Lord Warburton's response suggests that in the psychological "strugggle of consciousnesses,"[14] Isabel, like Mrs. Touchett, is able to use her mind to sum up, and hence dismiss, someone as socially great as Lord Warburton. His personification of her mind captures both the intensity of his disappointment and, more importantly, the role of judgment in defining and often in re-defining human relationships. Isabel's mind, Lord Warburton's thinks, has the power to fix what it judges, with the resulting feeling that what is seen through cannot possibly be desirable, since it can only be despised and treated as inferior or unworthy. In his bitterness, Lord Warburton makes the workings of Isabel's mind sound like those of Gilbert Osmond's restrictive and ungenerous one.

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[14] Girard 111.

One obviously cannot support the presumption that because an offer of marriage has been made, Isabel is obligated to accept it or to have an excellent reason for declining it. In her desire for a self-expressive mode of existence, Isabel refuses Lord Warburton's proposal because she is determined not to foreclose the possibilities of her life so early by becoming a wife. To understand Isabel's response is to perceive how James has solicited our sympathy for his heroine. As he points out, "The 'splendid' security so offered her was not the greatest she could conceive" (99). Isabel's mind can envisage far greater things than Lord Warburton's wealth and social position can provide, for her vision appears to transcend the material realm and reach into the spiritual. It is in this light that we are asked to understand Isabel's quest. As James points out at the end of chapter twelve,

> it appeared to her there had been no choice in the question. She couldn't marry Lord Warburton; the idea failed to support any enlightened prejudice in favour of the free exploration of life that she had hitherto entertained or was now capable of entertaining. (100-101)

More specifically, the proposal contains what James calls "narrowing elements" (101). Critics of The Portrait have generally quoted the following passage to account for Isabel's unwillingness to marry Lord Warburton:

> He appeared to demand of her something that no one else, as it were, had presumed to do. What she felt was that a territorial, a political, a social magnate had conceived the design of drawing her into the system in which he rather invidiously lived and moved. A certain instinct, not imperious, but persuasive, told her to resist--murmured to her that virtually she had a system and an orbit of her own. (94)

What draws James and the reader to Isabel is her having the imagination and the courage to want to use her freedom. She senses that by its very nature the proposal is a threat to her freedom, for marriage to Lord Warburton would surely imply and inevitably entail her dependence on him. Since she believes that she is capable of autonomy, that she has an orbit of her own, reliance on another person does not represent a compelling necessity.

Isabel's quest can also be seen as an attempt to transcend matter, to soar above everything that would restrict her movements, that would hamper her progress toward what she sees as the "realm of light" (53). Because she seeks what Richard Poirier identifies as "a sort of enlightenment, a spiritual and by no means discernible grandeur,"[18] Lord Warburton's offer constitutes too much of a hindrance, for his world, Isabel senses, is already defined, real, fixed. In fact, she comes to sum Lord Warburton up as "a collection of attributes and powers" (94). Unlike Gilbert Osmond, the Englishman is a solid entity, encumbered with all the trappings of the social world. In contrast, Osmond seems free from all the ordinary involvements of this world.

Isabel's rejection of Lord Warburton's marriage proposal, when looked into more closely, comes about also as the logical result of the various suggestions and the indirect recommendations made to her by the Touchetts, particularly by Ralph. Such suggestions--such mediation--

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[18] Poirier, *The Comic Sense* 217.

have invariably been overlooked by readers who choose to see the rejection as a clear exercise of Isabel's freedom: the presence of the mediator has simply been ignored.

We have already witnessed how Isabel's relationship with Henrietta Stackpole, her first real mediator in the story, has undergone a definite change--with Isabel distancing herself more and more from her friend--since Mrs. Touchett's advent in her niece's life, for the aunt's criticism of Henrietta is not lost on Isabel. In chapter eleven, Mrs. Touchett herself, and in her own manner, stresses the role of mediation in human affairs:

> She had expressed her surprise at her niece's having selected such a friend [as Henrietta], yet had immediately added that she knew Isabel's friends were her own affair and that she had never undertaken to like them all or to restrict the girl to those she liked.
>
> 'If you could see none but the people I like, my dear, you'd have a very small society,' Mrs. Touchett frankly admitted; 'and I don't think I like any man or woman well enough to recommend them to you. When it comes to recommending it's a serious affair. I don't like Miss Stackpole--everything about her displeases me; she talks so much too loud.' (88)

What makes Mrs. Touchett's words compelling--in spite of their infelicitous grammar--is their air of judiciousness and impartiality, but her views carry more binding suggestions than she is aware of, for the eager and sensitive niece is made to realize that her choice of such an unrefined friend is a reflection on her poor taste. Mrs. Touchett's seemingly disinterested recommendation works well because it leaves Isabel with the impression that she is still the author of her choices. When, on her first arrival in Gardencourt, Ralph feels sorry that Isabel should have been in the house for so long without his knowledge, Isabel replies, "'Your mother told me that in England people arrived very quietly; so I thought it was all right'" (26). In her "infinite hope

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that she should never do anything wrong" (53), Isabel is indeed very attentive to and often retentive of what others tell her. It is in this light that we should re-examine the reasons behind her decision to reject Lord Warburton's offer. In chapter fifteen, when Ralph expresses his surprise at her decision, we begin to realize just how seriously Isabel has taken some of Ralph's words:

> 'What had you in mind when you refused Lord Warburton?...What was the logic--the view of your situation--that dictated so remarkable an act?'
>
> 'I didn't wish to marry him--if that's logic.'
>
> '....nineteen women out of twenty...even the most exacting sort would have managed to do with Lord Warburton. Perhaps you don't know how he has been stalked.'
>
> 'I don't wish to know. But it seems to me,' said Isabel, 'that one day when we talked of him you mentioned odd things in him.' (130-31)

The logic Ralph is talking about is that of human mediation. Because of her inexperience and her desire to make her life a perfect work of art, Isabel has treasured up everything Ralph had said about Lord Warburton earlier in chapter eight. After she has met the Englishman and been to his estate, Isabel is initially delighted with him,[14] as she tells her cousin:

> 'I like your specimen English gentleman very much.'
>
> 'I like him too--I love him well,' Ralph returned, 'But I pity him more.'
>
> Isabel looked at him askance. 'Why that seems to me his only fault--that one can't pity him a little. He appears to have everything, to know everything, to be everything.' (69)

Ralph's rejoinder, even if he only seems to be joking, will turn out to carry more weight with Isabel than he may have intended:

> '[Lord Warburton] doesn't take himself seriously.... He occupies a position that appeals to my imagination. Great responsibilities, great opportunities, great consideration, great wealth, great power....But he's all in a muddle about himself, his position, his power, and indeed about everything in

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[14] Isabel also finds that Lord Warburton "had enjoyed the best things of life, but they had not spoiled his sense of proportion" (69).

> the world. He's the victim of a critical age; he has ceased to believe in himself and he doesn't know what to believe in.' (69)

The chapter concludes with Isabel's running to her uncle and asking him about Lord Warburton: "'you don't pity Lord Warburton...as Ralph does?' Her uncle looked at her a while with genial acuteness. 'Yes, I do, after all!'" (72) Though the representative of the best aristocracy in the novel, Lord Warburton does not appear to occupy "the high places of happiness, from which the world would seem to lie below one" (349). In other words, he does not enjoy "the essence of the aristocratic situation" (164). In the light of her aspirations and her new understanding, Lord Warburton is therefore lacking.

What makes Ralph's criticism of his English friend all the more decisive for Isabel is the manner and tone in which it is made and the way Isabel treats it. Ralph's conversation, much more than his father's, is permeated with mild ironic joking, but Isabel, especially in the first half of the novel, understands it quite literally. With considerable humour, Ralph suggests that Lord Warburton is suffering from some kind of spiritual malaise, that his life lacks a sense of purpose. No wonder that when Isabel rejects Lord Warburton's proposal, she feels she had to resist his design of drawing her into a "system in which he rather invidiously lived and moved" (94).

Isabel's imitative nature can again be perceived in her first encounter with the Misses Molyneux, Lord Warburton's sisters; as she tells Ralph, she is particularly struck by their "contented" (72) air:

> 'I think it's so lovely to be so quiet and reasonable and satisfied. I should like to be like that.'
> 'Heaven forbid!' cried Ralph with ardour.
> 'I mean to try and imitate them,' said Isabel. (73)

Having no fixed identity of its own, the unattached self contemplates imitating the various selves it encounters. It is as if, through imitation, the undefined self is seeking a form in which it will be able to live and express itself. Writing on his initial conception of his heroine's character, James describes Isabel as an individual "still at large, not confined by the conditions, not engaged in the tangle, to which we look for much of the impress that constitutes an identity."[17] Although Isabel is not really being serious--she is in fact being humorous--the incident nonetheless shows how imitation constitutes one of the novel's central concepts.

The playful desire to be like the Misses Molyneux quickly gives way to different considerations, especially now that she has rejected a marriage proposal from someone as socially important as their brother. Isabel's future is thus largely determined by the magnitude of her action, as the pressure to do something greater increases. Mrs. Touchett, who would have liked her to marry Lord Warburton, is surprised by what Isabel has done: "'One would think you were awfully pleased with yourself and carried off a prize! I suppose that when you refuse an offer like Lord Warburton's it's because you expect to do something better'" (121). The niece is indirectly being asked to justify what she has done. To Mrs. Touchett's understanding, Isabel has broken a bond in the social realities of Gardencourt. We should also note how the aunt's words affect the niece's future course: Isabel is being implicitly told to marry somebody greater than Lord Warburton if she does not want to disappoint the small Gardencourt community; she has to keep up, if not improve on, her performance.

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[17] Henry James, preface, The Portrait of a Lady, ed. Leon Edel (Boston: Houghton, 1963) 8.

What makes the pressure on Isabel more intense is that her critics eventually come to accept and even to approve of her bold actions; as the critics become understanding, Isabel feels herself under strong obligations to do better in the future. For instance, when she explains that she does not love Lord Warburton enough to marry him, Mrs. Touchett is quick to forgive her: "'You did right to refuse him then....Only, the next great offer you get, I hope you'll manage to come up to your standards'" (122). No doubt Mrs. Touchett is being both ironic and angry, but her suggestion is that, now that Isabel has rejected an English lord, she may do absolutely anything.

And there will be other people interested in what Isabel does with her freedom. Like his mother, Ralph considers Isabel's career worth following, especially now that she has done what he calls a "remarkable act" (130):

> 'I shall have the thrill of seeing what a young lady does who won't marry Lord Warburton.'
> 'That's what your mother counts upon too,' said Isabel.
> 'Ah, there will be plenty of spectators! We shall hang on the rest of your career....You know I'm extremely fond of the unexpected, and now that you've kept the game in your hands I depend on your giving us some grand example of it.' (131-32)

Ralph's words, though melodramatic at times, encourage Isabel on the path of the unconventional and the unexpected. In a way, the spectators have already determined the nature of Isabel's future course, for what can be more unexpected than her decision to marry Gilbert Osmond? The central action in The Portrait clearly illustrates the ironic effects of mediation on Isabel's life.

Readers of the novel have not generally paid sufficient attention to how Lord Warburton himself shares some of Isabel's particular attitudes. Just as Isabel tries to fulfill herself by challenging and defying experience, Lord Warburton affronts his destiny in a similar manner. Ralph Touchett is right: his English neighbour is all in a muddle about himself--he does not know what to believe in. In chapter one, Lord Warburton admits, although jokingly, that he needs a woman to tie around his neck as a "life-preserver" (23). What he actually seeks is an alliance that would justify him in the eyes of his mediators and that would also justify his radical, that is to say defiant, attitudes. As James suggests in chapter twelve, it is because Lord Warburton cares about what his friends think of him that he wishes to defy them by marrying an exceptional person like Isabel:

> He was about to take a step which would astonish all his friends and displease a great many of them, and which had superficially nothing to recommend it. The young lady...had come from a queer country across the sea....her antecedents, her associations... showed as distinct and unimportant. Miss Archer had neither a fortune nor the sort of beauty that justifies a man to the multitude....He summed up all this--the perversity of the impulse... and the judgment of mankind, as exemplified particularly in the more quickly-judging half of it: he had looked these things well in the face and then had dismissed them from his thoughts. (95)

Attracted by Isabel's mind, Lord Warburton, in his willingness to marry one who has no clear past, no family, no fortune, no extraordinary beauty, brings out the limitations of his friends' perception--a perception clouded by the worship of superficial and visible values. Marriage to Isabel would justify his radical posture in his own eyes and in the eyes of the world at large; it would assure him the sort of personal and spiritual recognition he seeks and would at the same time enable him to triumph over his displeased friends. But in contrast to Gilbert Osmond's studied defiance of the world--a point to be addressed later--Lord Warburton's, like Isabel's, is free from affectation.

Another convincing example of how Lord Warburton draws his sense of himself from other people can be found in his reaction to Isabel's rejection. At first, Lord Warburton suspects that Isabel may be in love with another person; but when, in chapter fourteen, he is not allowed even that satisfaction, he finds himself tormented by the crushing sense of defeat:

> Isabel walked to the other side of the gallery and stood there showing him her charming back, her light slim figure, the length of her white neck as she bent her head, and the density of her dark braids.... there was something so young and free in her movement that her very pliancy seemed to mock at him. (117)

The intensity of Lord Warburton's feeling of defeat shows in sharp contrast to Isabel's sense of freedom and ease, while the metaphysical nature of his desire can be felt in his longing to subdue and possess the girl's pliancy.

While Lord Warburton represents a social threat, Caspar Goodwood, Isabel's second suitor, looms more as a personal and sexual threat: "There was a disagreeable strong push, a kind of hardness of presence, in his way of rising before her" (23). As we learn in chapter thirteen, Caspar stands for too much raw will:

> Caspar Goodwood expressed for her an energy...that was of his very nature...he insisted, ever, with his whole weight and force: even in one's usual contact with him one had to reckon with that... he liked to organize, to contend, to administer; he could make people work his will, believe in him, march before him and justify him. This was the art, as they said, of managing men. (104-05)

Caspar is too much of a conspicuously constricting force to stand a chance with Isabel; while she might still have retained some of her freedom in Lord Warburton's 'system," her 'pliancy' would be rigidly regulated and eventually stifled in Caspar's world.[18] To avoid such a state Isabel rejects, more than once, Caspar's marriage proposals, for, once her encounter with Mrs. Touchett has opened up a suddenly enlarged way of life, Isabel knows that marriage to Caspar is no longer desirable. Her rejection of Caspar's proposal is also a consequence of her reaction to Lord Warburton's offer; as she reflects in chapter thirteen, "The idea of a diminished liberty was particularly disagreeable to her at present, since she has just given a sort of personal accent to her independence by looking so straight at Lord Warburton's big bribe and yet turning away from it" (104). And Isabel also knows that other people are watching her progress and that therefore she has to meet their expectations. In chapter sixteen, for instance, she tells Caspar that she does not need his protection since she can take care of herself:

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[18] Caspar's determination to make people justify him anticipates a similar inclination in Gilbert Osmond, since both of them are "movers"

> 'I shouldn't be an easy victim--I've proved it.'
> 'Oh, to me perfectly.'
> 'I've proved it to others as well....I refused a proposal of marriage last week; what they call--no doubt--a dazzling one....It was a proposal many girls would have accepted; it had everything to recommend it.' (138).

Isabel's words, underscoring her awareness of her mediators ("others," "they," and "many girls"), suggest that she has in fact proved her superiority to the multitude--the people who would have gladly and gratefully accepted an offer which failed to move her. There is also a touch of snobbery in her afterthought ("no doubt"). The conversation with Caspar serves to articulate the nature of Isabel's quest: her desire to transcend social greatness--what the multitude finds extremely commendable. In telling her story, Isabel cannot but feel proud of her achievement, for she believes she has nobler desires and a more refined

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[18](cont'd) (105) of people: Caspar in a crude manner, Osmond with a great deal of sophistication.

taste than most people.

In sharp contrast, Caspar Goodwood has neither taste nor tact. Isabel feels he is impervious to hints and insensitive in social situations. In fact, Caspar, who is awkwardly persistent, does not know when to let Isabel alone. Unable to feign indifference, Caspar shows his desires too openly, making himself undesirable in the process. When Isabel asks him, "'Aren't you capable of making a calculated effort? You're strong for everything else; why shouldn't you be strong for that?'" Caspar characteristically replies, "'An effort calculated for what? I'm capable of nothing with regard to you...but just of being infernally in love with you. If one's strong one loves only the more strongly'" (136). In contrast to Osmond, the man of calculated effects, Caspar is simple, direct, and crude. He represents the raw energy of the New World and has not developed to that extreme level of sophistication reached by his Europeanized compatriots. In his own way, he is what he appears and he appears what he is.

Since Isabel desires to make her life a work of art, she finds that, from an aesthetic point of view, Caspar Goodwood is deficient:

> she sometimes thought he would rather be nicer if he looked, for instance, a little differently. His jaw was too square and set and his figure too straight and stiff: these things suggested a want of easy consonance with the deeper rhythms of life. (105)

At this point, Isabel's artistic sensibilities seem misplaced and sound fastidious and exacting. That her artistic taste is flawed becomes obvious when she fails to realize what lies beneath Osmond's highly polished appearance and manner.

Essentially, Isabel perceives Caspar as having no style. For one thing, he does not even know how to dress:

> she viewed with reserve a habit he had of dressing always in the

> same manner; it was not apparently that he wore the same clothes continually, for, on the contrary, his garments had a way of looking rather too new. But they all seemed of the same piece; the figure, the stuff, was so drearily usual. (105)

Isabel's criticism of Caspar's way of dressing, which really says as much about her as about him, suggests how much her preoccupation with taste and style reflects a keen concern for the way people look and also for the way others look at her. Isabel also fails to appreciate the significance of the fact that no matter how dull and dismal Caspar's manner of dressing may be, he, unlike Osmond, is simple and honest.

Isabel's most revealing objection to Caspar is that "He showed his appetites and designs too simply and artlessly" (106). In his simplicity and inexperience, Caspar is unable to pretend what he does not feel, unable to play the game of dissimulation--Isabel had earlier described him as "very simple-minded" (90). All in all, Caspar is deficient because, to Isabel's mind, he lacks the social graces that govern civilized social intercourse. Even in his manner of looking at her, Isabel detects "a stiff insistence, an insistence in which there was such want of tact" (271). In obvious contrast to Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, Caspar Goodwood has no tact, no taste, no style, no sophistication, no refinement: he is a non-entity in the world of art.

After Isabel has turned down two marriage proposals, James carefully prepares the stage for her encounter with Madame Merle. To give the moment maximum effect, he removes the other characters from the scene: the two rejected suitors take their leave, Henrietta departs for Bedfordshire, and Ralph and his mother devote their time to the dying Mr. Touchett. Convinced that "each new acquaintance would exert some momentous influence on her life" (149), Isabel, in chapter eighteen, comes upon a stranger seated at the piano in the Gardencourt living-room:

> [The stranger] touched the piano with a discretion of her own. It showed skill, it showed feeling. Isabel sat down noiselessly on the nearest chair.... When [the piece] was finished she felt a strong desire to thank the player...while at the same time the stranger turned quickly round, as if but just aware of her presence. (149)

Isabel appears charmed, almost hypnotized, by her first impression of Madame Merle, for the latter's skilled performance seems so delightful that Isabel, unconsciously, sits down quickly and quietly. Madame Merle's action at the end of the piece can be seen as part of the overall effect. Careful about how other people view her, Isabel may have felt her insignificance when she had to wait until the end of the performance before the stranger bothered to turn round and face her.

The young girl finds the new person's appearance and manner very pleasing, and, in her initial rapture, she takes Madame Merle at first to be a "Frenchwoman," then a "German of high degree, perhaps an Austrian, a baroness, a countess, a princess" (152). Isabel's speculations reflect the hold the stranger has already acquired over her imagination. James is indeed aware of the workings of metaphysical desire, for, as he tells us, "[Madame Merle] was in a word a woman of strong impulses kept in admirable order. This commended itself to Isabel as an ideal combination" (152). The long list of adjectives ("charming, sympathetic, intelligent, cultivated...rare, superior, pre-eminent") Isabel applies to her new acquaintance depicts Caspar Goodwood's opposite. Although Madame Merle confesses that she is actually a social non-entity--"'what have I got? Neither husband, nor child, nor fortune, nor position, nor the traces of a beauty that I never had'" (171)-- Isabel remains convinced that she "had never encountered a more agreeable and interesting figure than Madame Merle" (161). For the young girl, the elder woman's superiority lies in her possessing the finest social graces.

Isabel's extremely favourable impressions are, however, not all her own, for two other people in Gardencourt, who are great admirers of Madame Merle, approve of Isabel's growing friendship with her. When Isabel asks Ralph, "'Pray who is this Madame Merle?'" she receives a highly commendable description: "'The cleverest woman I know.... she's so welcome wherever she goes...she does everything beautifully. She is complete'" (153). Unlike his depiction of Lord Warburton, which contained some "odd things" (131), Ralph's portrayal of Madame Merle suggests perfection itself. He even reinforces that picture when he describes Madame Merle as "'the one person in the world whom my mother very much admires. If she were not herself (which she after all much prefers), she would like to be Madame Merle'" (153). Ralph's usual humour and his half-hearted criticism of his mother, though apparently lost on his cousin, do not really detract from his and James's awareness of the mechanism whereby one character wants to appropriate the being of another. Ralph approves so much of Madame Merle that he presents her as a model for Isabel to imitate: "'Ah, with Madame Merle you may go anywhere, de confiance....she knows none but the best people'" (211). Little does Ralph realize how much weight his words will carry with his cousin.

Mrs. Touchett, too, is a strong admirer of Madame Merle. The aunt, who has earlier declared that recommending is a very "serious affair" (88), has no reservations when she urges her niece to get acquainted with the visitor; in chapter nineteen, she explains to Isabel why their friend is staying with them at such a sad time as the dying of Mr.

Touchett:

> 'You mustn't think it strange her remaining here at such a time as this....She is incapable of a mistake; she is the most tactful woman I know. It's a favour to me that she stays; she's putting off a lot of visits at great houses....she has the pick of places....But I've asked her to put in this time because I wish you to know her. I think it will be a good thing for you. Serena Merle hasn't a fault.' (167)

Mrs. Touchett's words make Madame Merle appear to be tact incarnate. In the realm of manners, she seems like a queen, whose visits, even when they take place at awkward moments, are smoothly converted into favours. Because Mrs. Touchett greatly esteems Madame Merle, she sees to it that the two women get acquainted. She reminds Isabel of how "'Your sister Lily told me she hoped I would give you plenty of opportunities. I give you one in putting you in relation with Madame Merle. She's one of the most brilliant women in Europe.... she knows absolutely everything on earth there is to know'" (167).

Because the question of Isabel's attraction to Osmond constitutes a major interpretative issue in The Portrait, understanding the significance of Ralph and his mother's praise of Madame Merle is crucial. Their recommendations work well to establish her as a highly desirable model for Isabel. Indeed, Ralph comes to think of the relationship in terms of instructor and disciple (213).

During Madame Merle's stay in Gardencourt, Isabel has plenty of time to discover why the elder woman excites so much interest:

> Before luncheon, always, Madame Merle was engaged; Isabel admired and envied her rigid possession of her morning. Our heroine had always passed for a person of resources and had taken a certain pride in being one; but she wandered, as by the wrong side of the wall of a private garden, round the enclosed talents, accomplishments, aptitudes of Madame Merle. She found herself desiring to emulate them, and in twenty such ways, this lady presented herself as a model. 'I should like awfully to be so!' Isabel secretly exclaimed, more than once, as one after another of her friend's fine aspects caught the light, and

> before long she knew that she had learned a lesson from a high authority. It took no great time indeed for her to feel, as the phrase is, under an influence. (163)

The passage is essential to a correct understanding of the development of Isabel's character and, therefore, to an accurate reading of her seemingly surprising attraction to Osmond. The passage may in fact be considered the turning point in the history of Isabel's consciousness, for, besides its language of imitative desire--with Isabel's 'desiring to emulate' and to 'be' like her 'model'--the passage is abundantly suggestive of the workings of mimetic conduct. Isabel, the desiring subject, is suddenly made to feel her unimportance in the presence of a model who inspires envy and admiration because of her superior attributes. The image of the subject wandering helplessly by the wrong side of the wall of the model's private garden works well to capture Isabel's sense of loss, unimportance, and, most importantly, exclusion. The model, in her apparent serenity and autonomy, enjoys her being and her garden all by herself, without her giving the slightest attention to eager onlookers. Her being 'engaged' before luncheon and her 'rigid' possession of her mornings indicate the manner in which she self-absorbedly excludes others, intimating that she is self-sufficient.

Isabel's encounter with Madame Merle is indeed, as James notes, "a turning point in [Isabel's] life,"[19] since, the young girl who "was always planning out her development, desiring her perfection, observing her progress" (55) is made to doubt herself and to be conscious of her imperfections. The realization is the essence of the lesson Isabel learns from a high authority. It is therefore not surprising that, now that she feels 'under an influence,' now that she has fallen victim to mimetic desire, she should intensely wish to imitate Madame Merle. Isabel, who has always, publicly, prided herself on her freedom and her independence, is thus surrendering her fundamental prerogative: she will now pursue objects which are determined for her, or at least seem so, by her model--by her mediator of desire.

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[19] Henry James, preface, The Portrait of a Lady, ed. Leon Edel (Boston: Houghton, 1963) 14.

That Isabel has already lost some of her self-determining youthful energy can be discerned at the beginning of her friendship with the elder woman. For instance, she fails to perceive the obvious suggestions of violence in which Madame Merle couches her 'praise' of her: "'I want to see what life makes of you. One thing's certain--it can't spoil you. It may pull you about horribly, but I defy it to break you up'" (162). Isabel simply finds the words flattering:

> Isabel received this assurance as a young soldier, still panting from a slight skirmish in which he has come off with honour, might receive a pat on the shoulder from his colonel. Like such a recognition of merit it seemed to come with authority. (162)

At the beginning of their friendship, Isabel considers Madame Merle so much the superior that their relationship has all the characteristics of what Girard calls "external mediation."[28] In spite of their increasing intimacy, Isabel, content with her humble position as a faithful disciple, never sees herself as a threat to the other woman. As James explains,

> It is said that imitation is the sincerest flattery, and if Isabel was sometimes moved to gape at her friend aspiringly and despairingly it was not so much because she desired herself to shine as because she wished to hold up the lamp for Madame Merle. (163)

Isabel's loyalty, which amounts to a form of imitation, an acceptance of the elder woman's standards, colours Isabel's perception of her once-close friends. Her allegiance to the new model, for instance, re-defines her view of Henrietta:

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[28] Girard 9.

> Isabel sometimes asked herself what Henrietta Stackpole would say to her thinking so much of this perverted product of their common soil, and had a conviction that it would be severely judged. Henrietta would not at all subscribe to Madame Merle.... On the other hand she was equally sure that, should the occasion offer, her new friend would strike off some happy view of her old: Madame Merle was too humorous, too observant, not to do justice to Henrietta, and on becoming acquainted with her would probably give the measure of a tact which Miss Stackpole couldn't hope to emulate. She appeared to have in her experience a touchstone for everything, and somewhere in the capacious pocket of her genial memory she would find the key to Henrietta's value. (164-65)

Isabel is busy trying to justify her new outlook on experience, and, if she can prove that Madame Merle's attributes are, in the final analysis, superior to Henrietta's, Isabel's new choices would justify her in the eyes of the multitude. The proof would also reveal how Isabel has enlarged her understanding and has luckily transcended the stage (Henrietta's) at which someone like Madame Merle would be considered eccentric and judged narrow-mindedly. Isabel is in no doubt as to the outcome of a hypothetical confrontation of wit and aptitudes between her past and present models. Madame Merle's seeming breadth and generosity of mind would place Henrietta once and for all, by exposing her utter provinciality, her crude prejudices, and her glaring tactlessness.

Finding the key to someone's value, judging and placing him effectively, amounts to what Isabel considers the 'aristocratic condition.' It is the highest quality Isabel admires in her new friend:

> 'That's the great thing,' Isabel solemnly pondered; 'that's the supreme good fortune: to be in a better position for appreciating people than they are for appreciating you.' And she added that such, when one considered it, was simply the essence of the aristocratic situation. In this light, if in no other, one should aim at the aristocratic situation. (164)

Isabel's present notion of the 'aristocratic life,' if closely examined, is other-oriented; instead of transcending the usual and the conventional, it actually defines itself by measuring itself against them and derives its sense of superiority or advantage from the comparison.

Unlike the social fortune of a Caspar Goodwood or a Lord Warburton, the so-called 'aristocratic situation' seems to belong to both the artistic and the spiritual realms. If rightly understood, the "aristocratic situation" allows the less conventionally fortunate (like Madame Merle or Gilbert Osmond) to acquire a different and, in Isabel's eyes, a better kind of distinction, a spiritual greatness, based on taste and feeling, that inevitably and naturally makes one superior to the conventionally great. Because it seems to have its roots in the mind, and not in the external world of chance, birth, circumstances, and social status, it is a more refined, personal, and just way of achieving superiority.

When Madame Merle does meet Henrietta, Isabel feels herself thoroughly justified, for her new friend immediately strikes off a happy view of her old:

> Madame Merle surveyed Henrietta with a glance, took her in from head to foot, and after a pang of despair determined to endure her. She determined indeed to delight in her. She mightn't be inhaled as a rose, but she might be grasped as a nettle. Madame Merle genially squeezed her into insignificance, and Isabel felt that in forseeing this liberality, she had done justice to her friend's intelligence. (236)

Dazzled by Madame Merle's brilliance, Isabel fails to read the encounter correctly. There is nothing tacful or liberal in the elder woman's attitude, for, in addition to revealing her snobbery and impatience, she appears to judge both quickly and ungenerously, and, in her smug certainty that Henrietta is of no significance, she chooses to see her as an object of entertainment. The irony is that it is Madame Merle, not

Henrietta, who 'severely judges' the other.

Though Isabel does begin to develop some reservations about her new friend's "social quality"--she finds, for instance, that Madame Merle's nature "had been too much overlaid by custom and her angles too much rubbed away" (165)--she fails to see through her model's calculated conduct, thereby mistaking the appearance for the essence of the 'aristocratic situation.' And to her imagination, her new friend has achieved a greatness of her own:

> To be so cultivated and civilized, so wise and so easy, and still make so light of it--that was really to be a great lady, especially when one so carried and presented one's self. It was as if somehow she had all society under contribution, and all the arts and graces it practised--(164)

Madame Merle emerges as a queen of society who seems to have renounced vanity and appears indifferent to worldly greatness. Isabel, attracted by this superior air, is willing to do her friend's attributes justice by becoming a faithful disciple who heeds her model's advice and wishes; in other words, Isabel is ready to 'justify' Madame Merle.

Madame Merle's way of talking about her friend Gilbert Osmond renders him desirable to Isabel's imagination; the portrait is sketched so as to pique the young lady's interest: "She had mentioned to Isabel most of the people the girl would find it well to 'meet'--of course, she said, Isabel could know whomever in the wide world she would--and had placed Mr. Osmond near the top of the list" (206). Madame Merle's seemingly disinterested recommendation leaves Isabel with the impression that she is free to meet Osmond or not. Knowing how much Isabel cherishes her independence, Madame Merle, unlike Henrietta, refrains from pushing her choice on Isabel.

She then goes on to describe Osmond as "one of the cleverest and most agreeable men--well, in Europe simply" (206). However, Osmond does not seem to be the kind of person who vulgarly shows off his talents, and only a few people are fortunate enough to discover his superiority: "'if he cared or was interested or rightly challenged--just exactly rightly it had to be--then one felt his cleverness and his distinction'" (207). As if aware of the workings of mimetic desire, the model, who knows how much Isabel loves to be challenged, sets up seemingly impossible tasks for the aspiring subject to perform. In her eagerness to prove herself both to Madame Merle and eventually to Osmond, Isabel will actually fall into her friend's trap, for Madame Merle's diabolical afterthought ("just exactly rightly it had to be") is too enticing to Isabel's keen imagination to be missed. The trap to catch Isabel is ingenious precisely because it resorts to mediation of desire to entrap the eager subject.

Madame Merle's recommendation of Osmond makes Isabel think that, perhaps, she is not good enough for him, that he would not care about someone like her; as Madame Merle explains,

> He was easily bored, too easily, and dull people always put him out; but a quick and cultivated girl like Isabel would give him a stimulus which was too absent from his life....One shouldn't attempt to live in Italy without making a friend of Gilbert Osmond, who knew more about the country than any one except two or three German professors. And if they had more knowledge than he it was he who had most perception and taste--being artistic through and through. (207)

Isabel is being implicitly lectured on the qualities to avoid and the ones to cultivate if she wishes to be considered worthy of so rare a man as Osmond. The obstacles Madame Merle puts in Isabel's way make the girl more and more determined to know, and perhaps please, the man of the highest artistic sensibility in Italy. Since Isabel is already greatly impressed by Madame Merle, what the latter recommends is naturally desirable: "Isabel said she would be happy to know a person who had enjoyed so high a confidence for so many years" (207). It is such moments in the story that actually determine the heroine's destiny, for they leave a strong impress on her sensibilities; her desire to meet Osmond is utterly mediated, and her reaction when she encounters him can already be predicted.

Isabel is in fact so concerned with what Osmond will think of her that her major fear is that she might appear stupid in his presence. Her first glimpse of him, when he comes to pay Madame Merle a visit, leaves Isabel greatly impressed:

> Mrs. Touchett was not present, and these two had it, for the effect of brilliancy, all their own way.... It all had the rich readiness that would have come from rehearsal. Madame Merle appealed to her as if she had been on the stage, but she could ignore any learnt clue without spoiling the scene--though of course she thus put dreadfully in the wrong the friend who had told Mr. Osmond she could be depended upon. (208-09)

That the theatrical performance is meant to impress the girl is clear; the important thing to note, however, is Isabel's fear of disappointing Madame Merle. Her anxiety lest she appear dull is so strong that, immediately after Osmond's departure, "Isabel fully expected her friend would scold her for having been so stupid" (209). Madame Merle is, however, very reassuring: "'You were charming my dear.... You're never disappointing'" (209).

The more Isabel tries to please, the more she enslaves herself to what she believes to be Osmond's expectations. With Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton, Isabel was doing the judging, but with Osmond, she is afraid of being found lacking in taste and perception. On her first visit to his house, Isabel feels increasingly conscious of her "obligations" (210) to Osmond:

> The place, the occasion, the combination of people, signified more than lay on the surface; she would try to understand--she would not simply utter graceful platitudes.... It must be confessed that her pride was a trifle alarmed. A man she had heard spoken of in terms that excited interest and who was evidently capable of distinguishing himself, had invited her...to come to his house. (215)

Isabel's strict observance of her words, and her fear lest she sound flat and boring, attest to the hold of mimetic desire on her imagination.

One of the most significant scenes in the novel occurs in chapter twenty-four when Osmond is showing Isabel his art collection:

> She listened to him with attentive ears, but was not thinking of what he told her. He probably thought her quicker, cleverer in every way, more prepared, than she was. Madame Merle would have pleasantly exaggerated; which was a pity, because in the end, he would be sure to find out, and then perhaps even her real intelligence wouldn't reconcile him to his mistake. A part of Isabel's fatigue came from the effort to appear as intelligent as she believed Madame Merle had described her, and from the fear (very unusual with her) of exposing ... her possible grossness of perception. It would have annoyed her to express a liking for something he, in his superior enlightenment, would think she oughtn't to like; or to pass by something at which the truly initiated mind would arrest itself. She had no wish to fall into that grotesqueness--in which she had seen women (and it was a warning) serenely, yet ignobly, flounder. She was very careful therefore as to what she said, as to what she noticed or failed to notice; more careful than she had ever been before. (221)

The comicality of the scene--with Isabel feeling tired from her attempts at being as intelligent as Madame Merle may have described her--suggests Isabel's artificial and calculated behaviour designed to please Osmond. In spite of her earlier insistence on her freedom, Isabel cares so intensely about Osmond's judgment that she completely loses her spontaneous and lively nature.

Isabel's concern with Osmond's opinion stems from her desire to acquire what she believes him to be endowed with: a 'truly initiated mind.' To attain Osmond's 'superior enlightenment' is to enter the narrow but fortunate circle of those untouched by the vulgarity and grotesqueness of the less discerning minds. However, the more Isabel strives to prove herself to Osmond, the more vulnerable she becomes to his and Madame Merle's machinations.

Unlike Caspar Goodwood's and Lord Warburton's declarations of love, Osmond's is tactfully made and, more significantly, with a degree of indifference to its reception. Isabel is given, once again, the impression that the choice is all hers. Toward the end of chapter twenty-nine, James tells us that Osmond "had repeated the announcement in a tone of almost impersonal discretion, like a man who expected very little from it but who spoke for his own needed relief" (258). Unlike the other two proposals, Osmond's seems neither pressing nor persistent, and its apparent air of indifference serves to arouse Isabel's curiosity. Osmond even makes a point of stressing his lack of interest: "'There's one thing more. I haven't asked anything of you--not even a thought in the future; you must do me that justice'" (259). By suggesting that he has not actually fallen under her power and that his pride, independence, and dignity are still his, Osmond is indirectly making himself desirable to Isabel's mind.

Indeed, Isabel is both impressed and convinced by Osmond's professions and by his apparently simple, quiet, honest, and dignified way of life. She comes to believe that he does not really care about what most people usually care about, that he has deliberately renounced what the multitude considers great. In chapter twenty-four, we learn what it is he has given up: some years earlier, he had apparently decided, as he tells Isabel, "'to be as quiet as possible.... Not to worry--not to strive nor struggle. To resign myself. To be content with little'" (222). Osmond thus presents himself as someone who has, through his "studied [and] wilful renunciation" (223), freed himself from the hold of desire and transcended the worries and passions of the material world. The fact explains, at least to Isabel, Madame Merle's earlier description of him:

> 'He's Gilbert Osmond--he lives in Italy; that's all one can say about him or make of him. He's exceedingly clever, a man made to be distinguished, but, as I tell you, you exhaust the description when you say he's Mr. Osmond who lives tout betement in Italy. No career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything.' (169)

According to Madame Merle, Osmond lacks social recognition, but he seems to enjoy a different kind of distinction that only few people can perceive: he has apparently freed himself from the necessity of toil, from the accidents of birth and social status, and, most importantly, from a preoccupation with his public image. In other words, Osmond seems to have become what he himself has chosen to be. To transcend social attachments is to reach the pure form of self: free, autonomous, truly aristocratic. There is a connection between such a portrait and Isabel's famous definition of self:

> 'I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which I choose to wear don't express me; and heaven forbid!....I don't care to be judged by [the way I dress].' (173)[21]

Osmond seems to embody Isabel's idea of the independent self, for he appears not to care about the judgments of the outside world.

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[21] Isabel's conviction that clothes do not, and should not, express self clearly contradicts her earlier objection to Caspar Goodwood's poor manner of dressing.

When the characteristics that make Osmond a superior model are closely examined and understood, we come to realize why the highly imaginative girl falls in love with him and why her decision to marry him cannot be dismissed as a mere mistake. With his apparent indifference to worldliness and his superior enlightenment, Osmond could in fact be seen to embody what James himself considered admirable in Emerson's vision "of what we require and what we are capable of in the way of aspiration and independence."[22] Like Osmond, the Emersonian character[23] has also renounced the world:

> It is a sign of our time [writes Emerson], conspicuous to the coarsest observer, that many intelligent and religious persons withdraw themselves from the common labors and competitions of the market and the caucus, and betake themselves to a certain solitary and critical way of living, from which no solid fruit has yet appeared to justify their separation. They hold themselves aloof: they feel the disproportion between their faculties and the work offered them, and they prefer to ramble in the country and perish of ennui, to the degradation of such charities and such ambitions as the city can propose to them.
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> ....
>
> They are lonely...they shun general society; they incline...to find their tasks and amusements in solitude.
>
> ....
>
> With this passion for what is great and extraordinary, it cannot be wondered at that they are repelled by vulgarity and frivolity in people. They say to themselves, It is better to be alone than in bad company. And it is really a wish to be met,--the wish to find society for their hope and religion,--which prompts them to shun what is called society.[24]

The impulse to withdraw from society that defines Emerson's transcendentalist is, according to major critics of American literature, a particular feature of the American character. In 1923, D. H. Lawrence wrote, "I have never been in any country where the individual has such an abject fear of his fellow countrymen."[25] According to Lawrence, the American character does not want to live with masters but wants to be his own master. Lawrence goes on to argue that "Men are free when they belong to a living, organic, *believing* community ...not when they are escaping to some wild west."[26] Lionel Trilling notes that "we are probably the first people to think of [the idea of the unconditioned spirit] as a realizable possibility and to make that possibility part of our secret assumption."[27] Trilling's observation addresses the character's dislike of the material circumstances in which spirit exists. Examining the function of style in American literature, Richard Poirier finds that

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[22] Henry James, "Emerson," in Partial Portraits (Wesport, Connecticut: Greenwood P, 1970) 9.

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[23] Poirier rightly points out, in The Comic Sense of Henry James, that "The consummate irony of The Portrait of a Lady is the degree to which Osmond is a mock version of the transcendentalist" (219).

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[24] Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Stephen Whicher (Boston: Houghton, 1957) 198-201.

> The classic American writers try through style temporarily to free the hero (and the reader) from systems, to free them from the pressures of time, biology, economics, and from the social forces which are ultimately the undoing of American heroes and quite often of their creators.[28]

In a book significantly entitled *The Imperial Self*, Quentin Anderson identifies Emerson, Whitman, and James as the major American thinkers responsible for encouraging "a persistent impulse on the part of the individual to withdraw affect from the collective life."[29] Anderson notes that "All three believed that the worst thing a man could do was to accept the conditions of action in the society or the community, to pin himself to a particular role."[30]

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[25] Lawfence 9.
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[26] Lawrence 12.
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[27] Lionel Trilling, "William Dean Howells and the Roots of Modern Taste," in *The Opposing Self* (New York: Viking P, 1955) 90-91.
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[28] Poirier, *A World Elsewhere* 5.
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[29] Quentin Anderson, preface, *The Imperial Self* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971) vii.

American literature has indeed provided us with many examples of characters turning their backs, both literally and metaphorically, on society. James Fenimore Cooper's Deerslayer is a great renouncer; for instance, in the concluding chapters of The Pathfinder, he goes even so far as to surrender his claim to Mabel Dunham, the woman he loves, to his friend Jaspar, thereby saying 'No' even to emotional life. Writing about his friend Thoreau, Emerson tells us that "[Thoreau] found [saying No] much easier than to say Yes."[31] Indeed, in his essay "The Village," Thoreau recommends that we lose the landmarks of habit and convention if we want to find ourselves:

> In our most trivial walks, we are constantly, though unconsciously, steering like pilots by certain well-known beacons and headlands, and if we go beyond our usual course we still carry in our minds the bearing of some neighboring cape; and not till we are completely lost, or turned round,--...do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of Nature. Every man has to learn the points of compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves.[32]

Melville's Bartleby, the Scrivener, another memorable outcast, prefers to step outside the system; unwilling to copy, that is to say--to imitate--any more, Bartleby simply and quietly prefers to say 'No,' not in a voice of thunder, but as uncompromisingly and efficiently as can be. In the last paragraph of Huckleberry Finn, Twain has his hero declare: "'I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before.[33]

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[30] Anderson ix.

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[31] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau," in Walden and Civil Disobedience, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: Norton, 1966) 268.

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[32] Henry David Thoreau, Walden and Civil Disobedience, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: Norton, 1966) 114-15.

Such figures of the American imagination have been called the saint, the saviour, the mystic, the genius, the idealist, the madman, or the artist. Eccentricity of conduct is their defining trait: their appearance and opinions are conspicuously different from those of the multitude. To preserve what they perceive as the integrity of their minds and to be true to their vocation, they shun society, reject conformity, and choose to live outside or on the margin of the conventional, because for them, social attachments and worldly preoccupations spoil man's pure and noble nature.

The marginality of Osmond, the artist, is what draws Isabel to him. Before their marriage, Osmond has so convinced her that he belongs to the tradition of the lucky few who have achieved greatness by escaping social fixity that Isabel is charmed by the polished surface and is ready to defend him against traditional criticism. In chapter thirty-four, when Ralph points out that Osmond has no fortune, Isabel's spirited defense clearly puts her cousin in the wrong:

> 'I can't enter into your idea of Mr. Osmond....He's not important--no, he's not important; he's a man to whom importance is supremely indifferent. If that's what you mean when you call him "small," then he's as small as you please. I call that large--it's the largest thing I know....Pray, would you wish me to make a mercenary marriage--what they call a marriage of ambition?...Mr. Osmond has never scrambled nor struggled--he has cared for no worldly prize. If that's to be narrow, if that's to be selfish, then it's very well....You talk about one's soaring and sailing, but if one marries at all one touches the earth.... Your mother is horrified at my contenting myself with a person who has none of [Lord Warburton's] advantages--no property, no title, no honours, no houses, nor lands, nor position, nor reputation, nor brilliant belongings of any sort. It's the total absence of all these things that pleases me. Mr. Osmond...is not a prodigious proprietor.' (286-87)

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[33] Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, ed. Sculley Bradley and others, 2nd. ed. (New York: Norton, 1961) 229.

In planning to marry someone who seems indifferent to social greatness, someone whose life is free from any human mediation, Isabel is actually heeding Ralph's earlier advice to her in chapter twenty-one: "'Spread your wings; rise above the ground. It's never wrong to do that'" (189). Isabel's understanding and definition of what constitutes 'importance' are to be hers, and no longer socially determined. In other words, Isabel comes to detach herself from mediated concepts by creating her own, and, in this respect, she becomes truly Emersonian. As the speaker in "Self-Reliance" urges,

> What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule...may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion.[34]

Isabel is, of course, mistaken in her conception of Osmond; but her ambition remains admirable because it is noble, and her consistent defense of Osmond is honest. The nobility of Isabel's position lies in her enlightened refusal to define 'greatness' only from the perspective of social advantages, in her spiritual conception of the term. Although she may be willfully deviating from acceptable or conventional expectations and though she may seem unreasonably unconforming, her ambition is a comment on someone like Mrs. Touchett, who is unable to see beyond Lord Warburton's worldly superiority. In its scheme of things, the novel is asking us to sympathize with and admire the eager and intelligent niece, who is capable of nobler imagination than her aunt.

Many readers of The Portrait have overlooked this nobility of Isabel's ambition. J. M. Newton, one of Isabel's, and James's, harshest critics, claims,

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[34] Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson 151.

> My main proposition is the double one that Isabel's ambition and imagination, which we are led to think of as making a very distinguished as well as a very attractive person and which are only thoroughly satisfied by what she sees of Gilbert Osmond before she marries him, are actually a spiritual disease, and that once the reader does what James doesn't do and identifies them as a disease all the charm of the novel and especially of Isabel begins to fade.[38]

There surely is something distinguished and attractive in Isabel's faith and in her courage to want a nobler foundation for distinction. Her being deceived by Osmond's facade is not the point: she is deceived precisely because there was something admirable about that facade. As she saw him, Osmond was "not a prodigious proprietor," but a simple, "a very cultivated, and a very honest man" (288). These qualities surely ought not be considered criteria for abnormality.

When we perceive the way in which one object of desire is shown to be more beautiful and attractive than the previous one, we come to see the gradual and logical stages Isabel's life has gone through. Every new model has, or seems to have, something that makes him or her superior to the previous model. After eclipsing Henrietta Stackpole, Mrs. Touchett introduces Isabel to Madame Merle, somebody the Touchetts clearly think highly of. Madame Merle, for her part and for her particular reasons, sees to it that Isabel gets to meet Gilbert Osmond, an even more superior being. The logical progression from one mediator to another gives consistency to Isabel's actions and helps dispel the kind of uncertainty we find Ralph Norman expressing when he says that "Things happen in James's world, but it is not clear why. Osmond acquires Isabel, but it is not clear whether this is a result of Osmond's and

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[38] J. M. Newton, "Isabel Archer's disease, and Henry James's," *Cambridge Quarterly* 2 (1966-67): 4.

Madame Merle's machinations, or a result of Isabel's own perversity."[36] Arnold Kettle too finds Isabel's decision to marry Osmond hard to accept and thinks the whole episode a fraud:

> It is worth noting what would seem an odd weakness in the novel. Is it not a little strange that of all the essential parts of Isabel's story which are revealed to us the section of her life most pointedly avoided is that immediately before her decision to marry Osmond?.... This is, from the novelist's point of view, the most difficult moment in the book. How to convince us that a young woman like Isabel would in fact marry a man like Osmond? And it is a moment which...is I suggest not satisfactorily got over. And the point is that if Isabel's marriage to Osmond is in any sense a fraud perpetrated upon us for his own ends by the author, the book is greatly weakened.[37]

Kettle goes on to explain that "what is achieved is a kind of inevitability, a sense of Isabel's never standing a chance, which amounts not to objective irony but to the creation of something like an external destiny."[38] To understand the importance of human mediation in Isabel's life is to comprehend what Kettle calls 'external destiny,' for, once Isabel is in the grip of mimetic desire, once she falls under Madame Merle's 'charm,' the course of her actions becomes indeed inevitable.

Even Ralph Touchett, who surely does not wish Isabel to marry Osmond, comes to see the logic underlying her decision. In chapter thirty-four, after Isabel's cousin finds himself convinced by the consistency in her conduct:

> Ralph had listened with great attention, as if everything she said merited deep consideration; but in truth he was only half thinking of the things she said, he was for the rest simply accommodating himself to the weight of his total impression--the

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[36] Ralph Norman, *The Insecure World of Henry James's Fiction* (London: MacMillan, 1982) 177.

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[37] Arnold Kettle, "Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*," in *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Robert D. Bamberg (New York: Norton, 1975): 685.

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[38] Kettle 685.

> impression of her ardent good faith. She was wrong, but she believed; she was deluded, but she was dismally consistent. (288)

In her spiritual quest, Isabel believes that, in Osmond, she has come upon the person who has completely renounced worldly ambition.

But Gilbert Osmond's withdrawal from society is simply a pose. His apparent detachment from worldly concerns and his seeming indifference to social importance are elaborate gestures designed to deceive. Even his house, for instance, is symbolic of his deceptive front:

> [The] imposing front had a somewhat incommunicative character. It was the mask, not the face of the house....the house in reality looked another way....The windows...were...extremely architectural; but their function seemed less to offer communication with the world than to defy the world to look in. They were massively cross-barred, and placed at such a height that curiosity, even on tiptoe, expired before it reached them. (192-93)

The man's solid conventionality can be discerned in the imposing design of the windows, the function of which, it seems, is to suggest that the outside world can be dispensed with; the house, looking another way, shows how its occupant is intentionally turning his back on society.

But Osmond's actions are deliberate, and, far from renouncing social ambition, he is in reality the worst victim of mimetic desire in the novel. In one of his conversations with Isabel before their marriage, Osmond claims that he has managed to subdue his desires:

> 'I used to want a great many things before and to be angry I didn't have them. Theoretically I was satisfied...I flattered myself I had limited my wants. But I was subject to irritation; I used to have morbid, sterile, hateful fits of anger, of desire. Now I'm really satisfied.' (291)

In a sense, Osmond can be called a flat character because his mask barely disguises the fact that he is a fortune-hunter. His fits of discontent attest to his conviction that such a 'cultivated' man as himself is unfairly treated by the 'vulgar' world, that his superior intelligence and his sophisticated perceptions are not given their due credit.[39]

And Osmond's desires are huge. His models are great men of power who enjoy tremendous recognition. As he declares in chapter twenty-four,

> 'There were two or three people in the world I envied--the emperor of Russia, for instance, and the Sultan of Turkey! There were even moments when I envied the Pope of Rome--for the consideration he enjoys. I should have been delighted to be considered to that extent; but since that couldn't be I didn't care for anything less, and I made up my mind not to go in for honours.' (223)

Carefully considered, Osmond's words reflect an odd mixture of indolence, impertinence, arrogance, and excessive self-esteem, while his powerful envy betrays his deep-seated resentment of the socially successful.

One of Osmond's important mediators in the story is Lord Warburton. As he tells Isabel in chapter twenty-eight,

> 'He's very good-looking. How detestably fortunate!--to be a great English magnate, to be clever and handsome into the bargain, and, by the way of finishing it off, to enjoy your high favour! That's a man I could envy.'
>
> Isabel considered him with interest. 'You seem to me to be always envying some one. Yesterday it was the Pope; to-day it's poor Lord Warburton.'
>
> 'My envy's not dangerous; it wouldn't hurt a mouse. I don't want to destroy the people--I only want to *be* them. You see it would destroy only myself.' (251)

The striking thing about this passage is Osmond's view of desire as a means of appropriating somebody else's being, of assimilating the mediator's being. In this context, Girard argues that "The wish to be absorbed into the substance of the Other implies an insuperable revulsion for one's own substance."[40] Osmond is perceptive enough to know that he is a failure, that he is "a sterile dilettante" (286), as Ralph rightly calls him. Because he is constantly making comparisons between himself and the persons who are, exasperatingly, his superiors, Osmond can see only too well that he is small, and thus lives under the permanent dread of inferiority and humiliation.

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[39] His sister, the Countess Gemini, points out that Osmond "'has always appeared to believe he's descended from the gods'" (228).

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[40] Girard 54.

Osmond's keen envy of Lord Warburton reminds one of Iago's acute sense of inferiority and of his secret but overwhelming envy of Cassio, who "hath a daily beauty in his life/ That makes [Iago] ugly." Unlike Iago--probably the greatest example of the resentful character in literature--Osmond desires only to be others, not to destroy them.

Another strong indication that Osmond's sense of self is derived from others can be found when he learns that Isabel, who is about to marry him, has turned down Lord Warburton's offer. Osmond's thoughts about the matter reflect the triangular nature of his interest in Isabel:

> We know that he was fond of originals, of rarities, of the superior and the exquisite; and now that he had seen Lord Warburton, whom he thought a very fine example of his race and order, he perceived a new attraction in the idea of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects by declining so noble a hand. Gilbert Osmond had a high appreciation of this particular patriciate; not so much for its distinction, which he thought easily surpassable, as for its solid actuality. He had never forgiven his star for not appointing him to an English dukedom, and he could measure the unexpectedness of such conduct as Isabel's. It would be proper that the woman he might marry should have done something of that sort. (253)

Osmond is experiencing a sophisticated kind of aesthetic pleasure in perceiving that Isabel, the gem of his collection, has actually rejected a man better born and more richly endowed than he is. He has the paltry sensation of vicariously being as great as, if not greater than, Lord Warburton. Isabel's intrinsic worth, in Osmond's eyes, depends on the extent to which she is desired by other men.

Marriage to Isabel would finally offer Osmond his long-awaited chance, and other people would at last come to appreciate his style. As we are told in chapter twenty-nine,

> The desire to have something or other to show for his "parts"--to show somehow or other--had been the dream of his youth.... His "style" was what the girl had discovered... and now...she should publish it to the world without his having any trouble. She would do the thing for him, and he would not have waited in vain. (255)

Osmond's need to be justified points to what he secretly knows: that he is a fraud whose indolence cannot justify his existence or support his pretensions to superiority. Osmond's intense concern with society can also be discerned in his need to 'show' or 'publish' his style to the world. In short, Osmond's life, even after his marriage to Isabel, is a show put on for the sake of his mediators. For instance, he insists on keeping up, purely for form, the tradition of his 'famous' Thursday evenings, of which Isabel "had grown very weary, but to which her husband still held for the sake not so much of inviting people as of not inviting them" (404). What might initially appear as perverse conduct is in fact a ploy--the strategy of the coquette. "In order to be desired," writes Girard, "one must convince others that one desires oneself."[41] Osmond's is no genuine narcissistic desire, but a pretense of self-contentment.

The pose is so effective that even Ralph Touchett is initially deceived. During a visit to Rome, Ralph, we are told, "was obliged to admit that [Osmond] just now was a delightful associate. His good-humour was imperturbable, his knowledge of the right fact, his production of the right word, as convenient as the friendly flicker of a match for your cigarette" (253-4). Ralph is, however, not tricked for long; in fact, Ralph's crucial role in the story is to unmask Osmond, and, more significantly, to expose and explain Osmond's intense interest in the world.

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[41] Girard 78.

The process of revealing Osmond's social obsession begins when Ralph perceives that Isabel has unknowingly begun publishing her husband's style, and, as James points out in chapter thirty-nine, "Ralph, in all this, recognized the hand of the master; for he knew that Isabel had no faculty for producing studied impressions.... There was a kind of violence in her impulses, of crudity in some of her experiments, which took him by surprise" (323).[42] The difference between Isabel and Osmond is beginning to show, and, in what may be considered Ralph's moment of recognition in the novel, we come to understand the true nature of Osmond's mock renunciation:

> He recognized Osmond... he recognized him at every turn. He saw how he kept all things within limits; how he adjusted, regulated, animated their manner of life.... He always had an eye to effect, and his effects were deeply calculated.... To surround his interior with a sort of invidious sanctity, to tantalize society, with a sense of exclusion, to make people believe his house was different from every other, to impart to the face that he presented to the world a cold originality--this was the ingenious effort of the personage to whom Isabel had attributed a superior morality. (324)

Eager for control and power and intensely aware of the eyes of the world, Osmond, Ralph's insight suggests, leads a sterile existence, devoid of naturalness or spontaneity, while his 'originality' derives its basis from the deceptive but cheap effects of his theatrical way of life.[43] But, although Osmond--not Caspar Goodwood--is the epitome of will in the story, his will is itself controlled from outside, thereby making his actions thoroughly mediated. As Ralph goes on to reflect,

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[42] Before Isabel realizes what her marriage to Osmond entails, Ralph has already noticed the change in his once free and independent cousin and realized how she has completely surrendered to her husband her once cherished freedom:

> The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. What did Isabel represent? Ralph asked himself; and he could only answer by saying that she represented Gilbert Osmond. 'Good Heavens, what a function!' he then woefully exclaimed. He was lost in wonder at the mystery of things. (324)

> Under the guise of caring only for intrinsic values Osmond lived exclusively for the world. Far from being its master as he pretended to be, he was its very humble servant, and the degree of its attention was his only measure of success. He lived with his eye on it from morning till night.... everything he did was pose--pose so subtly considered that if one were not on the lookout one mistook it for impulse. Ralph had never met a man who lived so much in the land of consideration. His life on his hill-top at Florence had been the conscious attitude of years. (324-5)

It turns out that Osmond's presumed detachment from society has consisted in looking without being seen and that his apparent indifference to greatness does not amount to an absence of desire. Osmond, who has intensely but secretly yearned, who has always considered himself above ordinary struggles, is suddenly revealed in his complete enslavement to the world.

For her part, Isabel begins to see through her husband's mask when he and Madame Merle attempt to draw her into the psychological 'struggle of consciousnesses' they are experts at. Madame Merle is the first to suggest that Isabel exert her influence on Lord Warburton to make him marry Pansy:

> 'I want to see her married to Lord Warburton.'
> 'You had better wait till he asks her.'
> '...he'll ask her. Especially,' said Madame Merle in a moment, 'if you make him.... It's quite in your power. You've great influence with him... [Mrs. Touchett] let me know you had declined an offer of marriage from Lord Warburton.' (340)

Immediately afterwards, Osmond makes a similar request of his wife:

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[43] We should also note in passing how Ralph himself was aware of the noble and moral nature of Isabel's quest.

> 'You must have a great deal of influence with him.... The moment you really wish it you can bring him to the point.'
> 'Why should I have the influence?... What have I ever done to put him under an obligation to me?'
> 'You refused to marry him,' said Osmond with his eyes on his book... 'I hold that it lies in your hands.... Think that over and remember how much I count on you.' (347)

If correctly understood, Madame Merle and Osmond's requests amount to a form of temptation enjoining Isabel to fall into the world of means, to enter the realm where a person's desires can be effectively used against him or used to entrap him.

But a great deal of Isabel's charm and nobility derives precisely from her refusal to stoop to manipulation as a viable mode of human interaction. Her rejection of the temptation leads to a correct understanding of her husband's real nature and, more importantly, to the growth and articulation of her moral character.

Now that the worldly prize seems so near and so alluring, Osmond can no longer keep up his pretense, but Isabel finds such a sudden and strong desire startling, and her husband's conduct inconsistent:

> It was Gilbert's constant intimation that for him nothing in life was a prize; that he treated as from equal to equal with the most distinguished people in the world, and that his daughter had only to look about her to pick out a prince. It cost him therefore a lapse from consistency to say explicitly that he yearned for Lord Warburton and that if this nobleman should escape his equivalent might not be found. (345)

Isabel, who had earlier objected to Caspar Goodwood's tendency to show "his appetites and designs too simply and too artlessly" (106), cannot fail to notice how wanting in delicacy and propriety Osmond is when he requires that she act quickly lest Lord Warburton 'escape.' But unlike Caspar's, Osmond's situation is reprehensible because of his hypocrisy and falseness.

The attempt to draw Isabel into the game of desire jolts her into what James himself considers "obviously the best thing in the book,"[44] the moment of recognition in chapter forty-two:

> The suggestion from another that she had a definite influence on Lord Warburton--this had given her the start that accompanies unexpected recognition. Was it true that there was something still between them that might be a handle to make him declare himself to Pansy--a susceptibility, on his part, to approval, a desire to do what would please her?.... Was she to cultivate the advantage she possessed in order to make him commit himself to Pansy? (347-8)

Isabel finds the prospect "frightening" and thinks her husband's request "repulsive." The model, who had seemed so desirable before, is beginning to show unexpected and unattractive qualities: "Isabel looked at her companion in much wonderment; it struck her as strange that a nature in which she found so much to esteem should break down so in spots" (81-82). The companion in question is actually Henrietta Stackpole in an earlier chapter, but the irony of The Portrait is such that Caspar and Henrietta turn out to be superior to a Gilbert Osmond, who may be the incarnation of taste, but who is fundamentally false. In short, "the first gentleman in Europe" proves to be a fake, passionately seeking social approval.

Isabel's relationship with Osmond suggests how faith and trust finally triumph over sophistication and artfulness. Isabel had married Osmond because she believed in him,

> But when she began to see what it implied she drew back; there was more in the bond than she had meant to put her name to. It implied a sovereign contempt for everything in the world but half a dozen ideas of his own. That was very well....for he opened her eyes so wide to the stupidity, the depravity, the ignorance of mankind, that she had been properly impressed with...the virtue of keeping one's self unspotted by it. But this base, ignoble world, it appeared was after all what one was

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[44] Henry James, preface, The Portrait of a Lady, ed. Leon Edel (Boston: Houghton, 1963) 14.

> to live for; one was to keep it for ever in one's eyes, in order not to enlighten or convert or redeem it, but to extract from it some recognition of one's own superiority. On the one hand it was despicable, but on the other it offered a standard. (353)

Osmond's inconsistency shatters itself against the solidity of Isabel's steadfast belief, just as her faith ultimately exposes Osmond's pretensions to superiority:

> Osmond had talked to Isabel about his renunciation, his indifference, the ease with which he dispensed with the usual aids to success.... The indifference was really the last of his qualities; she had never seen any one who thought so much of others.... He was unable to live without [society], and she saw that he had never really done so; he had looked at it out of his window even when he appeared to be most detached from it. (354)

In essence, Isabel learns that her husband's life has never been free from human mediation.

It is also in this chapter that Isabel comes to understand the difference between her and Osmond's notions of the 'aristocratic situation':

> They attached such different ideas, such different associations and desires, to the same formulas. Her notion of the aristocratic life was simply the union of great knowledge with great liberty; the knowledge would give one a sense of duty and the liberty a sense of enjoyment. But for Osmond it was altogether a thing of forms, a conscious, calculated attitude ... There were certain things they must do, a certain posture they must take, certain people they must know and not know. (354)

Isabel's view of the aristocratic situation, combining duty and enjoyment, may be regarded as her (and James's) most articulate definition of virtue. In essence, Isabel seeks a responsible enjoyment of life. To call her quest 'perverse,' 'morbid,' or 'unrealistic,' as some readers of the novel have done, is to overlook the moral dimension of her search. Isabel's appeal is to be traced ultimately to an apparent oxymoron: the moral enjoyment of life.

The irony in Isabel's story is that in her search for an ideal form of behaviour, she has married the man who combines the exact traits for which she rejected her first two suitors. Besides living in a narrower and more regulated system than Lord Warburton's, Osmond can show his desires "too artlessly"--a tendency Isabel had initially thought characteristic of Caspar.

Osmond's narrow and illiberal nature shows itself most conspicuously when he realizes that Isabel has seen through his pose:

> The feeling [of hatred] was deep, because it was sincere; he had had the revelation that she could after all dispense with him. If to herself the idea was startling, if it presented itself at first as a kind of infidelity, a capacity for pollution, what infinite effect might it not be expected to have upon *him*? (356)

Isabel, who had admired him with perfect trust, has quickly turned into the critical wife thanks to the power of her eager mind:

> The real offense, as she ultimately perceived, was her having a mind of her own. Her mind was to be his.... he expected her intelligence to operate altogether in his favour.... He had expected his wife to feel with him and for him, to enter into his opinions, his ambitions, his preferences. (355)

Osmond's inordinate and sinister desire for power and recognition, indicative of his ungenerous and selfish nature, makes Caspar Goodwood's desire "to make people work his will, march before him, and justify him" (105) appear harmless in comparison. The man who had seemed to possess a 'truly initiated mind' turns out to be a monster determined, like the Duke in Browning's poem, to regulate his wife's very being.

In his *Notebooks*, James notes that this phase of Isabel's life is pervaded by her "exquisitely miserable revulsion" brought about by Osmond's "worldliness, his deep snobbishness, his want of generosity, etc.; his hatred of her when he finds that she judges him, that she morally protests at so much that surrounds her."[45] As well as being a repudiation of the once so desirable model, Isabel's moral protest is significant in that it indicates that while early in the story her judgments were largely aesthetic, toward the end, when she perceives what Osmond and Madame Merle are trying to draw her into, the moral reasserts itself in her conduct. Isabel's realization amounts to a new beginning, as she now sees that, though honest, her intense desire for an artistically perfect future had distorted her perception; she now finds some things in Osmond's life 'hideously unclean,' just as her vocabulary--that began expanding with the term 'eccentric'--is now making room for such words as 'justice,' 'duty,' 'chastity,' and 'decency.' And if Madame Merle had made Isabel's marriage, Isabel refuses to make Lord Warburton marry Pansy.

It is also in this light that we should understand Isabel's return to Rome and to Osmond. Isabel has become the tragic heroine who accepts the consequences of her actions. "'One must accept one's deeds. I married him before all the world'" (400), Isabel explains to Henrietta. In other words, Isabel comes to accept her obligations to the world.

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[45] *The Notebooks of Henry James*, eds. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York: Oxford UP, 1947) 17.

Conclusion

> There was a tension in America between the opportunity the young democracy offered each person, however plain, to realize himself in response to his own bent, and the Americans' nervous herding together that was an inevitable consequence of their being cast loose from the protections of inherited class, fidelity to a royal house, and membership in an established national church.[1]

> In democracies, where the members of the community never differ much from each other, and naturally stand so near that they may all at any time be confounded in one general mass, numerous artificial and arbitrary distinctions spring up, by means of which every man hopes to keep himself aloof, lest he should be carried away against his will in the crowd.[2]

> Undine was fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative. She wanted to surprise every one by her dash and originality, but she could not help modelling herself on the last person she met, and the confusion of ideals thus produced caused her much perturbation when she had to choose between two courses.[3]

Rene Girard explains that when, in the modern age, social and religious distinctions between men are erased or when stable traditions are replaced by fashion, man, unwilling to relinquish his desire for metaphysical autonomy, merely diverts this desire toward his neighbours. But this passionate imitation of individuals who are fundamentally his equals draws him into a life of inauthenticity and mimetic conflicts and results in an erosion of his identity.

Several critics have remarked on the 'thinness' of character in American fiction. Richard Chase, for instance, finds that, for the classic American writer, "Character itself becomes ... somewhat abstract and ideal, so much so in some romances that it seems to be merely a function of plot."[4] Richard Poirier makes a similar observation when, identifying what he believes characterizes nineteenth-century American novelists, he points out that their central subject is the "panoramic environment and the anonymity of the self."[5] Writing about *Sister Carrie*, Walter Benn Michaels notes that "the capitalism of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries acted more to subvert the ideology of the autonomous self than to enforce it."[6] Girard's theory of desire helps us see that if character constitutes an issue in American fiction, it is because in the realm of 'internal mediation,' the number of mediators has so increased and mimetic desire is so exasperated that it is indeed difficult for the individual to preserve his identity, let alone maintain his wholeness.

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[1] Larzer Ziff, The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation (New York: Viking P, 1966) 12.

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[2] Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, ed. Richard D. Heffner (New York: NAL-Mentor, 1956) 248.

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[3] Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country (New York: Scribner's, 1913) 13.

An examination of *Sister Carrie*, *The House of Mirth*, and *The Portrait of a Lady* in the light of Girard's concept of mimetic desire enables one to discern and articulate the intricate process of strategies, conflicts, delusions, and misunderstandings that underlies the characters' thoughts and conduct in these novels. By focusing on the deeper layers of consciousness, Girard's insights make it possible to perceive, more clearly than would have been possible otherwise, the operations of desire and, more fundamentally still, the imitative nature of these operations. We thus come to realize that the three works depict lives given to derivative ideals and mimetic reactions.

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[4] Chase 13.

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[5] Poirier, *A World Elsewhere*, 215.

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[6] Michaels 388.

But at the same time, these novels suggest ways of escaping the hold of imitiative behaviour. It is true that the half-hearted attempt made by Dreiser toward the end of *Sister Carrie* to introduce his heroine to the world of the mind is not very persuasive. But it would be a mistake to discount the moving power of the passages in which Wharton invokes tradition and faith to counteract the negative effects of the social mimetic entanglements portrayed in *The House of Mirth*. In Isabel Archer's experiences, James shows that to achieve a true 'aristocratic situation' is to reconcile style and truth, manners and moral intentions.

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